

## Chapter 1: The Once and Future Boy

I've watched his life's story forwards and backwards so many times that I've long since lost track of just how many times it's been. After all these years, to me it's like reading a well-loved book. The longer I watched the more I realized it had all gone so wrong because of the smallest mistakes. I just wanted to make it better, for him, but mostly for her. She never deserved what happened to her.

If I get really honest with myself, I had never previously tampered with his life because I was jealous that he had her and I didn't. Problem is, what could I have ever been to her when compared to him? I spent a thousand years sitting on a rock by the sea contemplating the truth of that before I finally made my decision. I would change it. I would make it better for him and all the others. Pulling myself up and dusting the dirt and grime of ages off my clothes, I wandered back through time towards the beginning of it all. Soon enough, I was standing in the room where it had all begun.

I didn't have to wait very long for the screaming to begin. Lily came running in, James screaming from down the stairs for her to run and take the boy with her. Of course, she would never leave her husband behind, and soon they were both lying cold and dead on the ground. The boy, nothing more than a toddler in his crib, crying for his mother as her killer stalked past her body, laughing as he pointed his wand at the defenseless child. Then, with a brilliant flash of green energy, the monster was dead and his body vaporized. The screaming boy bore the mark of his mother's love cut into his flesh. I watched the monster's soul, a shriveled and fractured thing, as it flew around the room until it finally split in two. The larger portion of the soul fled the room as I watched the smaller portion bind itself to the boy.

Once the main portion of the beast's soul had departed, I lovingly reached out my hand to caress the child's pure soul. This would be my first change, to strip away all the power of the madman's soul and grant it to the boy in its purest form so that it could never harm him. Then I forged the link between their two souls that would allow the boy to see into the mind of his parents' killer without fear of ever being controlled by him. The child would now have all the benefits of

the monster's mistake, and none of the drawbacks, something he had not had before.

As the child calmed, sleep coming over him naturally, I tucked him in gently before making my way out of the room. The tiny fragment of soul I still held in my hand was vibrating. It needed a host; it would, in fact, perish without one. I debated letting the mangled thing vanish into the ether, but eventually decided it would be better if I kept it safe for the moment. Making my way down to the private study of the boy's father, I sat down at his desk and looked around for a suitable vessel for a madman's soul. It didn't take me long to find what I was looking for, a plain quartz crystal about the size of my fist.

After a bit of a struggle, for the soul fragment did not want to enter the crystal prison, I finally managed to imprison it. I watched, entranced by the sight of it, as the crystal shone with a pale green light which came from the green puff of smoke that seemed to float around inside the now perfectly clear crystal. It was beautiful in its own horrific fashion. At least, I thought so as I picked up parchment and quill and began to write to the man I knew would cause me the most problems if I was to change anything.

Albus,

It would seem that Tom has finally made the mistake that you have for so long hoped he would. The prophecy holds true, Tom has marked this child as his adversary. Sadly, Lily and James gave their lives so that their son might live. That protection saved his life when nothing else could. He will not fully understand their sacrifice until he has his own children, and maybe not even then.

I have saved the boy from some future difficulties. If you are worth your reputation, it will not take you long to figure out what is inside the crystal I have left for you. However, I do not recommend you trying to destroy it since only the boy will ever be able to do that. When the time is right, I will show him the way and the means to do so. Believe me when I say that he will have the power to fulfill the prophecy, I have seen to that. The rest is up to the boy and whether or not he can find the power and the courage to do what must be done.

That brings me to my final advice to you. Make no mistakes that the boy is under my protection, Albus. Any decision you might choose to make regarding him will be seen by me, and I will decide if it is best for the boy or not. To that end, here are a few things you need to know up front.

Peter Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper for the Potters, not Sirius Black. You can confirm this by examining Black after you read this.

Tom Riddle is not dead; he will return.

The boy is NOT to go to his aunt and uncle to live. Sirius Black is his godfather and as such, and as per his parents' wishes, the boy is to live with him. No blood ward will serve him as well as being with his godfather.

The boy should be kept out of the spotlight. Tell Sirius to raise the boy away from the wizarding world until it is time for him to attend Hogwarts. Teach him well, but protect him from too much attention.

This is the most important. Don't keep secrets from the boy unless it is absolutely the only way. Remember, if he is old enough to ask the question then he is old enough to get the honest answer from you.

As proof that I know what I am talking about I will leave you with the following: The Elder Wand is in your possession. The Potter cloak is the second, and it will never recognize you as its master. Tom has the third and you will not find it until the time is right. If that is not enough proof for you then let me only say this, for what those boys did to your sister, I would have done the same as your father did.

Remember, I will be watching over the boy.

Sincerely,

With a flourish I signed my name, not that Albus would actually believe what he was reading. I was sure I was going to have to prove to him that I was to be taken seriously. That would come later, for now I still had to wait for Hagrid and Sirius Black to arrive. Making my way back upstairs, I watched the boy sleeping peacefully. It was

amazing to me that he could sleep with the corpse of his mother laying only a few feet away, but that is the wonder of childhood, they can sleep through almost anything.

It was almost two hours later that Hagrid arrived. The great brute of a man squeezed into the house, making his way up the stairs at a dead run. I was actually amazed when he was able to squeeze through the door to the boy's room. Tears ran fast and thick down his cheeks and into his bushy beard when he saw Lily lying on the floor, cold and dead. He scooped the boy up into his arms and carried him out of the room, down the stairs, and out into the dark night beyond. I of course followed silently behind them. We no sooner exited the house when the sound of a motorcycle announced that Sirius had arrived to see what had happened. Now was my time to act.

"Take the bike, Hagrid," Sirius was saying. "I won't need it now."

"I couldn't do that, Sirius," Hagrid said gently.

I concentrated for a moment and suddenly felt the chill night air on my body. "He's right, Sirius."

Both men spun around to see me standing behind them. Sirius, his wand already drawn, looked ready to kill me before he saw that I was not carrying a wand. I'm not sure what he must have thought as he looked at me. I had chosen not to dress the part, instead choosing to dress in simple Muggle slacks and a jumper.

"Put the wand down, Sirius," I commanded, and watched as he did it. "Who I am is not important. However, what I have to say is very important. Sirius, you are to go with Hagrid to see Albus right now."

"No," barked Sirius, his face contorted in rage. "I've got to kill that stinking rat for what he's done!"

"What good is that going to do for Harry?" I asked gently. "He needs his godfather now more than anything else. Revenge will not bring his parents back. It will only deprive Harry of his chance to be with someone that can raise him as his father and mother would have wished."

"Professor Dumbledore said I was to be taking Harry to his aunt and uncles," Hagrid objected.

"You both will, Hagrid," I said with a smile. "You will both go, Sirius! When you get there I want you to give Albus this."

I handed Sirius the letter and crystal. Sirius looked confused but he did not object. "Good. Now both of you, get that boy out of the cold right this moment."

Both men nodded, and a moment later I watched them leave. Letting my form relax, I drifted from the Potters' home to that of the Dursleys'. Minerva McGonagall was already there in the form of an old grey tabby cat. She was waiting for Albus, the same as I, although I did not plan on playing nice with him if he went against my wishes. Too many times I had watched him playing with the lives of those around him. I was not going to allow him to do it with this boy, not this time.

It really was a short wait before the old wizard showed up. He looked pompous as he arrived and immediately extinguished all the lights on the street. Then like a man that has never once doubted his own superiority, he made his way towards the Dursleys' house. I listened to him talking with the now human McGonagall. He reminded me of a wolf set loose on the sheep. Minutes later, they were joined by Hagrid and Sirius. I could see right away that Albus was unhappy about Sirius' presence. Given another moment or two, I think the old man might have actually attacked Sirius. Fortunately, true to my instructions, Sirius handed the old man my letter and the crystal. Yet even after reading my letter, Albus seemed to think he knew best. A heated argument broke out between Sirius and Albus, the latter refusing to allow Sirius to take the boy home with him.

"ENOUGH!" I bellowed, my form becoming solid again.

The instant I said it, Albus spun around reaching for his wand. As fast as the old man was, and believe me when I say that he was amazingly fast, I was faster. I snatched the wand from Albus' hand before he had even fully drawn it from his cloak. The old man looked shocked as he finished the motion and realized that his hand was

empty. He was even more amazed when I tossed his wand back to him a second later.

"You read my letter, Albus," I said coldly. "The boy will not be living here."

"The protections I can give him here cannot be broken," Albus objected, his face looking both angry and shocked all at once.

"I don't really care, Albus," was my cold reply. "You put too much faith in people. Didn't you learn anything from Grindelwald?"

"How dare you!" screeched the old man.

It was actually entertaining to poke fun at him, but I wanted the old fraud to get angry enough to try something stupid. Experience is the best teacher and I planned on him getting a lot of that in the next few minutes. The rest of them were in shock that I was talking to the "Great Albus Dumbledore" the way I was, but that was a good thing as well. Too many people thought he was some great icon of the age, but I knew better. I still had to whisper a few silent words of reassurance to the others so they wouldn't attack me.

"I dare because I can," I said as calmly as possible. "Unlike you, Albus, I've never allowed the innocent to die because it was for the 'greater good'. Speaking of that, how's your sister?"

That's all it took. An enraged and maddened Albus Dumbledore had his wand pointed right at my heart in the blink of an eye. I think he cast a Stunning spell, I don't really know since the barrier I had erected stopped it before it could ever get close to me. The look on his overconfident face was priceless as his spell just died in mid air a foot from my chest. McGonagall and Sirius just stared slack jawed at what was obviously the last thing they ever expected to see.

Albus still did not seem to realize that he was outmatched. Six more spells flew towards me as he worked himself up into a towering rage. Not a single spell got closer to me than the first one had. I walked forward until I could clearly look into his brilliantly blue eyes. As he began casting another spell, I snatched his wand from him again so

that he stood there waving an empty hand at me. I swear, his eyes nearly bulged out of his face.

"That was very impressive, Albus," I sneered. "I hope you understand now that I will not allow you to go against my wishes for the boy. He will live with Sirius, no matter what you might think. Leave him here, and I'll return him to Sirius within minutes. Try and hide him from me, and I'll find him faster than you can imagine."

Looking up at me, his face defeated and old, Albus finally seemed ready to listen. "You can't be Him. He's dead."

"Not dead, merely watching and waiting," I replied softly.

Finally finding his voice, Sirius stepped forward and tried to make sense of the situation. "I don't understand, Albus. Who is he?"

"He is a figment, a fantasy," stammered Albus. "He cannot exist."

"Watch it, Albus," I said calmly. "I might just take offence to your words and call you out to satisfy my honor."

The venerable old professor's face actually went ashen at the suggestion of a duel with me. McGonagall looked like she might be ready to have a go at it, and she might have if she weren't busy holding Hagrid back. Holding out my hands so that they could all see that I was unarmed, I finally walked forward and laid a friendly hand on the old man's shoulder.

"I am not here to cause any harm, Albus," I said as gently as I could. "I just cannot allow you to do harm to this boy, even if it is with the best intentions. Too much rides on his small shoulders to have you adding to his burden so soon."

"I do not intend him any harm," he said in a whisper. "I only want to do what is best for him, to protect him."

"You do not know what is best for him," was my immediate response. "You think he will thank you for leaving him here? Leaving him with

people that will hate everything about him? You think he will ever be whole after they are done abusing him?"

Albus seemed to almost be in pain now. He knew Vernon and Petunia Dursley for what they were. How could he not, when he had heard Lily speak of her sister often enough to know that the boy would never be loved in her home? Then again, Dumbledore had never really understood what it meant to be a child, so why would he think about it where the boy was concerned? The pain on his face was a clear sign of his indecision.

"How can you protect him better than I can?" Albus asked finally. "At least here the blood wards would keep them from finding him, from harming him in any way."

"That doesn't matter, Albus," I said looking at the small baby in Hagrid's massive hands. "Sirius will raise the boy the way that Lily and James would have wanted. As for his protection, I will see to that. He will be safe and happy. All you need to do is tell everyone that the boy lives, and that he destroyed Tom. The rest will take care of itself."

"I don't understand," Sirius finally said. "Who are you? I mean I'm thrilled you think I can do a better job raising Harry than these Muggles, but how can you know they would abuse him?"

"Listen to him, Sirius," McGonagall said softly.

I think she had finally figured it out. In all my time of watching the boy's life, she had always watched out for his well being before anyone else with only one exception. If Minerva had been younger, I might have insisted that she raise the boy, but that was not to be. With a gentle smile aimed at her, I turned back to Albus and waited for his acceptance of what had to be.

"We'll do it your way," Albus finally said. "I don't like it, but if you are who you claim to be, then you are probably the only one that can protect him without the blood wards."

Sirius finally seemed to have had enough of not being answered. "I'm not going to ask this again. Who the fuck are you?"



"Oh," I said with a little grin, "you would know me as King Arthur Pendragon, but my friends all call me Arthur."

It was like watching the poor man be hit upside the head with a mallet. He just froze in place with his jaw hanging down against his chin. A dozen times he tried to say something, to ask something, but his mind could not grasp it. I can't say I blame him in the least. If he had only known then what I was saving him from, I think he might have fainted right on the spot.

"Try not to think about it right now, Sirius," I said finally. "Just take the boy and raise him well. Raise him away from the notoriety and fame, if you can."

"How can I do that," he stammered finally, "when the entire world will know what happened tonight?"

"A fair question," I agreed.

Walking over to Hagrid, I took the child from him after a nod to the large man from Dumbledore. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the ring I had worn for most of my mortal life. It was just a plain gold ring, poorly made and badly worn after a lifetime of battle. Still, it held a magic all its own, placed there by Merlin himself to keep me hidden from those that would have taken advantage of me. Holding the ring to the boy's forehead I whispered the words that would bind its magic to him.

"See that this ring never leaves his possession," I said, handing the small boy to his godfather.

I pulled a strand of my own hair from my head and transformed it into a golden chain. Quickly slipping the ring onto the chain, I leaned forward and looped the necklace around his small neck. The magic of the necklace would not allow it to fall off or break, nor would it allow the chain to choke the child. Only the boy or I could ever remove it.

"Where should I take him?" Sirius asked finally.

"Take him anywhere you want," I said with a smile. "The magic of my gift to him will keep him safe. No one will recognize him for who he really is unless he wants them to."

Finally, they all seemed to accept what I was telling them. Albus still seemed reluctant, but I gave him little time to argue. In fact, I gave them little opportunity to do much of anything except write a note to Petunia Dursley explain about the death of her sister. As soon as that was done, I escorted Sirius and the boy from his aunt's home and to Sirius' home where he could gather the things he would need before going into hiding. As I watched them leaving, I smiled knowing that there would be many difficulties for them in the future. However, I would be watching over them from now on, and that would make all the difference.

## Chapter 2: The Disappearing Door

Harry Potter was not like the other children in the village he lived in with his uncle. For one thing, he had no proper parents. Harry's mother and father had been killed many years before. Since that time his uncle, Sirius Black, had raised him. Sirius was a good man, and Harry loved him very much, but that did not stop the children at his school from picking on him because he was an orphan. It also did not stop the adults in the village from making cruel comments about him when they thought Harry could not hear them. So, for the most part, Harry spent his time alone thinking about how much he wished he were like everyone else.

There was one problem with wanting to be like everyone else, because Harry had a secret. Harry's uncle Sirius was a wizard. For as long as Harry could remember, his uncle Sirius had been charming the oven to cook for them and making the dishes wash themselves. The other children at his school could brag about how interesting their mothers and fathers were, but Harry could tell no one about his uncle and how he was the most interesting of all. It just all seemed so unfair to Harry sometimes.

As it was, Harry spent most of his days in his room reading and wishing he had friends like the other children in the village. With the exception of the school bullies, no one at his school ever seemed to pay attention to him. If not for his uncle and his uncle's friend Remus, who was also a wizard as well as an honorary uncle, Harry would have been a very lonely boy. The two adults realized that Harry was not as happy as he could be so they spent a great deal of time teaching him magic and playing games with him. Harry loved it when they took him out flying on broomsticks or showed him a new magic spell using one of their wands. Flying was the best though, and especially when they played Quidditch, a game that they told him his father had been very good at.

The summer of Harry's eleventh birthday was probably the loneliest that Harry could remember. One of the local bullies had started telling stories about how odd he thought Harry was, and the local children had all turned against him. Up until then he had been allowed to at least play in the local park occasionally, but now the other children

would throw stones at him until he was forced to return home. He tried not to be angry with them. His uncle had told him that children could be cruel like that sometimes, but it was so hard not to be angry with them.

It was the first of July when Remus suggested that they take a trip to Muggle London to go to the museum there. Harry loved museums and he had always wanted to see the one in London. Sirius woke him very early that morning and they all crowded into the Muggle car which Harry's uncle owned for "appearance's sake." Soon they were on their way to London and what Harry hoped would be a very enjoyable day.

Unfortunately, it did not turn out to be nearly as enjoyable as Harry had hoped it would be, at least not at first. When they arrived at the museum Harry was surprised to see two boys from their village wandering around with their families. Harry tried to go unnoticed by them, but soon enough they saw him and began teasing him every time the adults were distracted.

"Potty Potter," they would whisper. "What you doing here, Potty? They let you in for free because you've got no parents, Potty?"

On it went. Harry tried to ignore the boys but they seemed to know exactly how to annoy him without anyone noticing. What was supposed to have been great fun for him had turned into a nightmare from which he could not escape. He thought about telling his uncles, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves, so Harry kept his thoughts to himself. It was only later that he realized that he had made the right decision.

While Harry was looking at a display of Egyptian artifacts he noticed a very pretty red haired girl and her father standing nearby. His uncles seemed to know the man. After a few moments, they had struck up a conversation with him. As usually happened when Harry was around, the man did not seem to notice Harry as he talked with Harry's uncles. That did not bother Harry at all since he was more interested in the man's daughter. Something about her fiery red hair and freckles seemed to draw Harry's attention like a magnet. Harry had never seen anyone, any girl that was, like her before.

"Whatcha looking at, Potty?" asked one of the boys who had just snuck away from his parents. "Fancy that girl, do you, Potty? She's too pretty for a nutter like you."

"And you think you're worthy?" asked the girl as she walked up behind the startled boy.

Rather than being embarrassed by her question, the boy turned and smiled at her in a knowing sort of way that made Harry's stomach tighten with anger. It was one thing to pick on him, it was quite another to pick on a stranger, let alone a girl. He was just about to say something when the girl's father walked over to see what his daughter was up to.

"Who is your new friend, Ginny?" he asked with a genuine smile.

"He's not a friend," she replied calmly. "He was picking on this other boy and I thought someone should do something about it."

The red haired man looked confused for a moment before he seemed to notice that Harry was standing there. With a sudden look of understanding he turned to look at Harry's uncles before he turned back to Harry and smiled. It was a rather strange smile. It seemed to Harry that the man finally saw him for the first time, saw him and recognized him.

"That was very nice of you, Ginny," the man said with a smile.

Harry could not help but notice that the boy had managed to sneak away while the girl and her father were talking. He noticed the boy standing a little ways away with his parents. With a look at Harry that spoke volumes, the boy drew his finger across his throat and pointed at Harry before moving away with his parents. Harry just sighed as he realized he would pay for the girl's actions no matter how grateful he was for them.

"Ginny," the man said to his daughter, "Why don't you and this young man look around for a bit while I talk with Sirius and Remus for a few minutes?"

“Sure,” she said with a wide grin.

Without another word, the young girl took hold of Harry’s hand and led him over to look at one of the large Egyptian statues nearby. For some reason Harry found suddenly that he could not speak. It might have had something to do with the fact that the red haired girl had not let go of his hand, or maybe it was that she actually seemed to like him.

“That won’t last once she finds out I’ve no parents,” Harry thought sadly to himself.

“My name is Ginny. What’s yours?”

“H-Harry,” he stammered, feeling rather nervous.

“It’s nice to meet you, Harry,” she said with a smile.

Neither of them spoke much as they wandered from display to display. Harry did not have a problem with their silence, as he secretly dreaded that she might ask him about his family. Fortunately, she seemed happy enough to only occasionally point out an interesting trinket or display. The few words they spoke to each other seemed tentative on both their parts, almost as if neither of them wanted to talk much about themselves. It was probably twenty minutes later as Harry and Ginny were looking at a golden mask when someone suddenly pushed him roughly from behind. Turning quickly, Harry saw that it was the young bully from earlier.

“You and your little tart got me in trouble, Potty,” snarled the young man. “You’re going to pay for that.”

Looking around Harry realized that his uncles, along with Ginny’s father, were nowhere in sight. He was just about to shout for them when Ginny pulled on his hand and he suddenly found himself running away from the angry boy. A moment later they were running down a side hallway towards the public washrooms. Ginny pulled open the door to a broom cupboard, quickly pulling Harry inside before closing the door behind them.

"We'll hide in here until he goes away," she whispered to him, drawing very close.

"Shouldn't we try and find your father and my uncles?" Harry whispered back.

In the close confines of the broom cupboard Harry could suddenly smell an oddly wonderful scent of flowers. At first, he thought it must be the cleaning supplies that were stored in the room. Then, as Ginny drew slightly closer to him, Harry realized that it was the young girl's hair that smelled so much like flowers. He could not help but take a deep breath as he enjoyed the smell.

"Where are you, Potty?" said a voice from outside the door. "I'm going to find you and your little tart. Then I'm going to pound you both flat."

Harry suddenly felt the blood pounding in his ears. How dare the boy threaten to hurt Ginny? He could understand why the boy might want to thrash him, that was almost a common occurrence, but to threaten Ginny was something else altogether. As he watched the boy open the men's washroom across the hall, Harry suddenly found himself wishing that the boy would be trapped inside. Just as the boy stepped inside there was a loud popping sound and Harry realized that the door had vanished behind the boy leaving nothing but a blank wall in its place.

"You just did accidental magic," Ginny said in an awed voice. "What's your last name?"

"It's Potter," Harry said glumly. "I didn't mean to do it but he was going to hurt you. I couldn't let that happen."

"You're Harry Potter?" asked Ginny as she opened the door. "You're really Harry Potter?"

"Yeah," he said looking down at the floor. "Don't tell anyone I told you though. My Uncle Sirius says I'm not to tell anyone who I am."

To his surprise, Ginny just smiled up at him and blushed. A moment later she stood up on the balls of her feet and kissed him on the cheek. Harry felt his face go red as he looked down at her in surprise. He had never been kissed by a girl before, let alone a very pretty one like Ginny.

“My last name is Weasley,” she said in a whisper. “I won’t tell anyone, Harry.”

“What’s this then?” asked a man’s voice.

Turning around, Harry saw Ginny’s father and his uncle standing in the hallway looking at them. Remus was standing a few feet away trying to keep anyone else from disturbing them. It was right at that moment that the muffled sound of someone yelling and screaming could be heard from where the door to the men’s washroom had been a few moments before. Both men looked at the wall with rather surprised expressions on their faces before Mr. Weasley started to laugh.

“Let me guess,” he said with a chuckle. “The young man that was bothering you before? Don’t worry; I’m with the Ministry so I will take care of it.”

Harry and Ginny could only hang their heads as Mr. Weasley pulled out his wand. With a flick of his wand the door reappeared in the wall. A moment later a very scared young boy came running out just in time for Mr. Weasley to catch him with a second spell.

“Obliviate!”

Harry and Ginny watched as the scared young boy’s eyes suddenly went dull. A moment later he seemed to wake up and walked quietly out of the hallway to find his parents. Whatever Mr. Weasley had done to him, Harry feared he would still find a way to make Harry suffer later. Ginny, on the other hand, seemed to find the whole situation very funny.

“Harry was just trying to protect me, Daddy,” she said looking at her father. “That boy was going to hurt Harry and he threatened to do the



same to me. Harry just wanted to make sure he didn't get the chance."

Sirius looked at Harry for a moment, he was obviously concerned. "Is this true, Harry?"

"Yes sir, Uncle Sirius," Harry said feeling as if he had let his uncle down.

"I appreciate your concern for my daughter, Harry," Mr. Weasley said with genuine warmth in his voice. "My name is Arthur Weasley, and if you ever need me, feel free to send me an owl."

"Thank you, Arthur," Sirius said holding a hand out to Mr. Weasley.

The two men shook hands and talked quietly for a few moments before Sirius motioned for Harry that it was time to go. Harry sighed and said goodbye to Ginny and her father before following Sirius out of the hallway to join Remus. Just as they reached Remus though, Harry felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to find Ginny standing behind him.

"Write me? Just send an owl or something, okay?" she said with a slight blush and a smile.

"Sure," Harry assured her with his own smile.

For the entire ride home, Harry kept thinking about Ginny Weasley and how she was the first person his age to ever really seem to like him. Better yet, she knew all about magic so he could tell her all about himself and his life with his uncles. To Harry, it felt as if a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders for the first time in his life. He was so deep in his thoughts about Ginny that he barely noticed when they arrived home, until Remus tapped him on his shoulder.

"Knut for your thoughts, Harry," said Remus with a smile. "You looked like you were a million miles away."

Harry blushed slightly before climbing out of the car. "I was just thinking about the museum."

"And a certain red haired girl, I bet," chuckled his uncle. "What is it about Potter men and red haired women?"

"I wasn't thinking about Ginny," Harry insisted but neither man seemed to believe him.

"Don't worry, Harry," Sirius said as he reached over to muss Harry's hair. "I'm sure you'll be hearing from Miss Weasley again very soon."

Although he tried not to show it, the thought of talking to or even writing to Ginny instantly put a smile on his face. As he walked off towards the small wooded area near his house, Harry could not help but think about all the things he wanted to tell Ginny about in his first letter to her. The only problem was that he did not own an owl, but maybe he could get one for his birthday if he asked his uncles politely. He was lost in those thoughts when a familiar voice startled him.

"Did you enjoy the museum, Harry?"

Harry looked up suddenly to see the figure of a tall man with sandy blond hair standing in front of him. If he thought about it, Harry had known this man all of his life, although he would be hard pressed to explain when or how he had first met him. All the same, the man had always been there when Harry needed him and his kind words had often soothed Harry's troubled mind when he had found it difficult to talk to his uncles about his problems with the other children.

"I really did, Mr. Knight," he answered with a wide grin. "I even met some people like Uncle Sirius."

"Is that so? Who were they?" the man asked in his deep and friendly voice.

"Well the man's name was Arthur Weasley, and he said he worked for the Ministry, whatever that is. I also met his daughter, Ginny, and she asked me to write to her!"

“Did she now?” the man said with a wide grin. “I’m happy to hear that you made a new friend, Harry.”

“Harry!” called Sirius from the house. “Come get something to eat!”

“I’ve got to go, Mr. Knight,” said Harry as he turned towards his house.

“Get a move on then, Harry,” said the friendly man. “We’ll talk more later.”

“Okay! See you later, sir,” called Harry as he ran towards his uncle’s voice.

The form of the man slowly faded from sight once the boy was gone. That did not mean that Mr. Knight, or Arthur as he was better known, was actually gone. No, he was still there watching over the boy he had chosen to protect. However, now there was a smile on his face that had been missing for some time.

“So he met Ginny Weasley today,” he thought to himself. “Now isn’t that an interesting turn of events.”

### Chapter 3: Letters from a Friend

When Harry woke up the next morning he found it hard to believe that his Uncle Sirius had not lectured him about the bit of accidental magic he had performed the previous day. It seemed like every time that something strange happened around Harry, he was always blamed for it. Not that Harry was prone to accidental feats of magic, but there had been a few notable occasions. Once when Harry had been running away from a large group of bullies, he had suddenly found himself on the top of the school building. He could not remember how he got there, only thinking that it would be nice if he could hide someplace the bullies would be unable to find him.

On another occasion, Harry had been very upset when a woman in the local market had commented to her husband about “that strange Potter boy.” Suddenly the woman’s tongue had started to swell up, and the next thing he knew her tongue was dragging on the floor. Fortunately, Sirius had been there to fix it and erase her memory of the event, but Harry had still gotten a lecture about it when he got home. No matter how much Harry tried to explain that he had not done it on purpose, Sirius always seemed think it was Harry’s fault when it came to magic.

As he made his way downstairs for breakfast, Harry was grateful for once that things had turned out alright the previous day. He was still rather shocked to have met a girl that not only liked him, but also knew about magic. His mind was full of thoughts of her as he wandered into the kitchen to find breakfast cooking itself while Sirius sat at the table reading the morning’s paper.

“Have a seat, Harry,” his uncle said without even looking up from the paper.

Harry’s stomach dropped as he heard his uncle’s voice. The tone his uncle was using was the one he always used right before lecturing Harry about something. Obviously Harry had not avoided a lecture about the previous day, it had only been postponed. Taking a seat, Harry waited for Sirius to put his paper down. He only had to wait a minute.

“Well, Harry,” his uncle said as he folded up the paper. “First of all I want to tell you how proud I am of you for wanting to protect Ginny Weasley yesterday.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, slightly shocked by his uncle’s words.

“Unfortunately,” Sirius continued, “we still need to talk about how you tried to protect her.”

Harry hung his head and sighed. “Yes, sir.”

“I know you didn’t mean to do anything wrong, Harry,” his uncle said with a smile. “I remember when I was your age and how strange things always seemed to happen at the worst times. I can’t blame you for the same thing happening to you.”

Harry was dumbstruck. This was not his uncle’s regular lecture about accidental magic. Every other time Sirius had tried to drive home the point that Harry needed to control his emotions so that things like that did not happen. This was something different though and Harry was unsure how to react to it.

“You have to remember to be more careful, Harry.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, Uncle Sirius,” Harry said feeling slightly defensive.

“I know you didn’t, Harry,” Sirius said with a gentle smile. “In fact you did it for the very best reason I can think of, to protect someone from being hurt. That’s why I’m not upset with you.”

“You’re not? Really?” Harry asked a feeling of hope blooming in his chest.

“Really, Harry,” smiled his uncle. “Like I said, I couldn’t be prouder of you. Just do me a favor the next time?”

“What’s that?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Next time,” Sirius said with a wink, “try not to let me find you in a broom closet with a girl you just met?”

Harry felt his cheeks turn red as Sirius stood up and started scooping eggs and bacon onto a plate for Harry. They spent the rest of breakfast laughing and talking about all the things that Harry had seen at the museum the previous day. Harry had been really impressed with the Egyptian artifacts he had seen. He really did not want to admit that the real reason he had liked them was because Ginny had shown so much interest in them. Still, it had been very interesting to listen to her talk about the artifacts and to see how excited she was by them.

“I’m really glad you had a good time, Harry,” Sirius said as he cleared away the dishes. “Maybe we can go back there some time?”

“You mean it?” Harry asked, running over to give his uncle a hug. “That would be great.”

“Sure,” Sirius said hugging Harry tightly. “Maybe we can even go again next week for your birthday? We’re going to be in London then anyway, right?”

“We are?” asked Harry, not remembering being told this previously. “Why are we going to be in London for my birthday?”

The look on Sirius’ face clearly showed that he had let something slip that he had not previously intended to mention. Harry was just about to push the topic when he saw something flying towards the kitchen window. At first Harry thought it was a rather small seagull, but a moment later he saw that it was an owl. When the poor bird finally landed on the window ledge it collapsed into pile of dirty-looking grey feathers. Sirius walked over and lifted the bird up enough so he could put a bowl of water down next to him. While the bird drank gratefully from the bowl, Sirius removed a letter that was neatly tied around the bird’s leg.

“Looks like it’s for you, Harry,” Sirius said as he handed the letter to Harry. “That wouldn’t happen to be from a certain young lady, would it?”

Harry looked at the letter with its neat little handwritten address on the front. This was the first time he had ever received a letter from anyone, the thought that it might be from Ginny Weasley made it all the more special to him. Quickly opening the letter, Harry scanned to the very bottom of it for the signature. Sure enough, there was Ginny's signature. All he could do was look up at his uncle with a wide grin on his face.

"Go on," Sirius said with a wink. "Go read your letter, but make sure you don't forget to do your chores."

Harry sprinted from the room with a smile on his face as bright as the sun. "I won't forget, Uncle Sirius."

Five minutes later found Harry sitting in his favorite spot. It was just inside the wooded area near his house, under a large beech tree. For as long as he could remember, Harry had been coming here whenever he wanted to be alone. Right then, that was exactly what Harry wanted so that he could read Ginny's letter without any interruptions. Pulling the letter out of his pocket, Harry sat down under the tree and looked at it for a moment before opening it. There were butterflies in his stomach as he sat there looking at it. He even imagined as he opened it that he could smell the light scent of flowers in the air.

Dear Harry,

I just really wanted to write you a letter when I got home today. I hope you don't think it's silly but I wanted to say thank you again for saving me from that boy. I hope you didn't get in too much trouble for it!

Anyway, I guess I should tell you a bit about myself...

On it went, three pages worth of details about Ginny's life and that of her family. There was the fact that she had six older brothers and that she hated being treated like the baby of the family. She wrote about how she loved to sneak out at night and borrow her brothers' brooms so she could go flying. She was always afraid one of them might find out and tease her about it, but that did not stop her from loving how it

felt to soar through the air with nothing beneath her but the air. Harry had often thought he was the only one that felt like that.

I've got to go now. Mum wants me to help her make dinner and with seven of us, that can take awhile. I'll send this with Errol after everyone is asleep tonight. He's old and slow, but if you want you can send a reply back with him. That is, if you want to reply. I hope you do.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Ginny

Ginny had dotted the letter i in her name with a little heart that Harry thought suited her perfectly. After reading her letter he felt like he had known her for years. He dug into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a couple sheets of paper and a pen that he had grabbed before leaving the house. In his excitement to write back to Ginny, Harry actually tore the first sheet of paper before he was able to calm himself enough to start writing.

Dear Ginny,

I was really happy to get your letter this morning. It's actually the first letter anyone has ever sent me. I don't think you sound silly at all and you're welcome. I just couldn't let that jerk hurt you.

Your brothers sound really great. I can't imagine how brave Charlie must be to work with dragons. I've never seen a dragon before, but if the real ones are anything like the ones in the stories I've read, he has to be about the bravest man in the world. Not to mention how cool it must be for your brother Bill to work in all those faraway lands, finding buried treasure and breaking horrible curses. They are just so cool! You are so lucky!

I live with my Uncle Sirius. He's the one that raised me since my parents died. Sometimes my other uncle, Remus, comes to visit. Sirius isn't my real uncle, he's actually my godfather, but he and Remus were really good friends with my mum and dad. I guess they left us some money though because my uncle doesn't work, but he does spend a lot of time working on projects. He never says what



they are, but I hear a lot of explosions from his workshop, and last week there was all this purple smoke pouring out the windows.

To Harry it seemed like he had only been writing for a few minutes. It was only when he heard Mr. Knight clear his throat that he looked up. The older man was sitting on a tree stump a few feet away and had obviously been sitting there for a while.

"Hello, Mr. Knight," Harry said bashfully. "I didn't hear you walk up."

"I hear that all the time, Harry," Mr. Knight said with a smile. "I think you had more important things on your mind, than saying hello to an old duffer like me. From the smile on your face, I'm guessing that letter is to Miss Weasley, am I right?"

Harry felt his cheeks go red as he nodded his head and looked down at his shoes. "She wrote me and told me all about her family. I just thought I should write back."

Mr. Knight smiled at Harry. "Sounds like you've made a good friend."

Harry and Mr. Knight talked for almost an hour about all the things that Ginny had told him in her letter. Eventually Harry realized that he was repeating himself when Mr. Knight started to chuckle softly. It was ok though because Mr. Knight always listened to what Harry had to say, and never complained or told him he was being silly like most of the adults he knew did. Mr. Knight was like his uncle and Remus, they treated Harry like he was a real person and not an orphan living with his uncle.

"Can I ask you something?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Of course you can, Harry," said the older man. "Ask away."

"Well, Ginny's family sounds really great. She's got all those brothers and her mum and dad," he said quietly. "I just wondered what your family was like?"

Mr. Knight sighed, and then smiled at Harry. "Actually, Harry, I was just like you when I was a boy. When I was a baby, even younger

than you were, I was sent to live with another family because my mother could not take care of me. It's a very complicated story, but I never met my mother, or my father. Luckily for me, there was a man that took me under his wing and taught me everything I needed to know to make it in the world. Later on he taught me other things as well."

"Like what?" Harry asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"I'll show you," Mr. Knight said with a wink.

Reaching down, Mr. Knight picked up a twig off the ground and placed it in the palm of his left hand. Very slowly he waved his right hand over the twig until Harry noticed a single green leaf slowly growing from the end of the dry old twig. Harry's eyes nearly bulged out of his face as he watched the leaf take form. He had always known that Mr. Knight was a wizard, although he had never before seen the man perform magic, but he had never seen anyone do magic without a wand before. Of course, he only knew three wizards other than Mr. Knight.

"How did you do that without a wand? I thought wizards always had to have a wand?"

"I'm not exactly a wizard, Harry," Mr. Knight said, handing Harry the twig. "What I do is not really magic the same way that you and your uncles can do it."

"Then what is it?" Harry asked excitedly.

Arthur smiled at the young boy for a moment before answering. "I guess you could say that I have a very commanding personality, Harry."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, his face twisted with confusion.

"One of these days," Arthur smiled, "when I have more time, I will tell you all about it. Ok? For right now, I have things I have to do and you have a letter to finish."

Harry looked a bit disappointed at not learning how Mr. Knight performed magic without a wand, but he did want to finish his letter. Besides, if Mr. Knight said he was going to do something, then he did it. In all the time that Harry had known the mysterious man, and that was most of his life, Mr. Knight had never broken a promise to him. So, if that meant he had to wait a bit, Harry could do that.

“Alright, sir,” Harry said nodding his head. “I can’t wait to see how you do it though.”

“And I can’t wait to teach you,” smiled the older man. “You had best get back home though. From the look of things, you still haven’t finished your chores for the day. We don’t want Sirius to get upset with you, do we?”

Harry sighed. “Everyone always remembers the chores.”

With a wave to his friend, Harry was off and running towards the house. He was so distracted by the thought of learning something new that Harry missed seeing the man suddenly vanish behind him. By the time he did look over his shoulder, Mr. Knight was gone.

Over the next few days Harry’s life took on a new pattern. In the mornings he would wait in the kitchen until Errol arrived with a letter from Ginny. Once he had made sure that Errol had water and food, Harry would rush out to the woods to read the letter and write his reply. As soon as that was done, he would rush back to the house to send his letter back with Errol. That out of the way, Harry would do all of his chores as quickly as possible before returning to the woods to reread Ginny’s letters until Sirius called him in to eat.

Each letter from Ginny was like a ray of sunshine for Harry. Not only was he learning loads of new things about Ginny and her family, he was also learning about the magical world in general. He was amazed at how much magic was out there and how little he knew about it, considering his uncle was a wizard. Then again, he had spent most of his life in a Muggle village, attending a Muggle school. Ginny, on the other hand, had been home schooled by her mother since she was very young. Harry could barely tell though because

from some of the things she had written him about, she was probably one of the smartest people he knew.

The night before his birthday found Harry sitting in his room reading his most recent letter from Ginny by candlelight. The weather had turned foul that night and shortly after dinner the power had gone out. His uncle had solved the problem with a wave of his wand, and now the house was lit with the soft glow of about fifty candles that never dripped any wax as they floated in midair. If it were any other night, Harry would have been amazed by the sight of floating candles, but Ginny's most recent letter had him a bit distracted. In it she talked about how her brother Ron had received his letter from Hogwarts a few days before. Harry had yet to receive a letter from the illustrious school of wizardry and witchcraft and he was starting to get worried.

Just as Harry was getting ready to go downstairs to ask his uncle about it, Harry heard someone knocking on their front door. Although knocking might not be the proper word for it since it sounded as if whoever it was standing outside was actually trying to knock the door off its hinges. As he ran towards the stairs, Harry heard Sirius running for the door, but it was already too late as with a loud crash of thunder and a hollow boom, their uninvited guest succeeded in breaking down their door.

## Chapter 4: The Gamekeeper of Hogwarts

From the top of the stairs, Harry peeked around the banister to see the impossibly large silhouette of a man in the doorway. The storm was raging behind the man's form, but he was so large that he blocked the entire doorway so that not a single drop of rain got past him. Harry could hear the man saying something to Sirius in a deep booming voice, but he could not make out what the man was saying over the wind and thunder. A moment later, Sirius was motioning the enormous man inside. In his entire life, Harry had never seen anyone as tall and wide as their strange and unexpected visitor. The man's coat alone looked as if it were larger than the boat tarp Sirius used to cover his car. Harry watched as his uncle suddenly drew his wand and quickly repaired and restored the broken door to its hinges, which immediately silenced the raging storm outside.

"I'm really sorry about the door, Sirius," Harry could hear the man saying.

"Don't worry about it, Hagrid," laughed Sirius. "Happens to the best of us, and around here more often than not. Care for some tea?"

"I'd love some," the strange man said in his gruff voice. "I wouldn't say no to something stronger if ye have it."

Sirius gave a good-natured chuckle before smiling at his guest. "I think we can find something to warm your heart."

Sirius took the man's enormous coat from him and together they made their way into the family room. Once the entryway was empty, Harry quietly snuck down the stairs until he reached the door to the family room. He crouched down into the shadows by the doorway to listen to his uncle talk to the stranger. At first all he could hear were the two men making small talk about the news and the weather. After a few minutes, the conversation seemed to die down, the periods of silence growing longer.

"So, what are you really doing here, Hagrid," Sirius finally said after an extremely long pause. "Not that I don't love seeing you again after

all this time, I really do, but I can only think of one reason you would be here now. The old man sent you, didn't he?"

"Well," said the big man's voice, sounding meek to Harry, "he was wanting ter make sure that Harry's letter was delivered. Since I was going to be in London anyway, he asked me to deliver it."

"Yes, I can see that," Sirius said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It makes perfect sense to send you when owls are so unreliable when it comes to these things. They've failed to deliver one of those letters how many times in the last thousand years? Never, if I remember correctly."

If it were possible to hear someone blushing, then Harry would have sworn he could actually hear the large man blushing at that moment. "Well, he was wantin' me to deliver something else as well."

Harry listened to the soft sound of rustling cloth followed a few moments later by the tearing of paper. Harry tried to hear any hint of sound coming from the family room after that, but it was completely silent. Minutes felt like hours as Harry waited in the shadows by the door. When his uncle did finally speak, his voice sounded unnaturally loud compared to the previous silence.

"He's still upset that things did not go his way," said Harry's uncle, his voice sounding tight and forced. "Funny how we haven't heard from him once in all this time, and now he wants to see how Harry is doing. It's like the boy was completely unimportant up till now."

"I'm sure that's not the case, Sirius," said the large man's voice. "He's been busy recently with the Minister sending him owls almost daily asking his opinion of things."

"That's recently, Hagrid," Sirius replied, not sounding convinced. "What about before that? I haven't heard a word from him since the night I brought Harry home with me. He's been acting like a spoiled child that didn't get his way, throwing a tantrum, and you bloody well know it."

Once again silence fell on the room and Harry waited several minutes before his uncle spoke again. "You know, Hagrid, I checked up on the Dursleys after that night. About a year ago I stopped by, pretended to be a reporter for a local newspaper doing a story on the local economy. It was pretty bad, Hagrid. Vernon Dursley is a vicious man and his wife wears more than one bruise to prove it. As for their son, Dudley I think his name is, that little beast is only eleven years old and he's already as nasty as his father. That was the family he wanted to leave Harry with. I can only imagine the way they would have treated him."

His uncle's last words sent a shiver of dread through Harry's body. Who was this man that had so much power over Harry's life that he had nearly sent Harry to live with people like the Dursleys? Why would anyone want to send him to live with people like that in the first place? Harry's mind spun with this strange new piece of information. He was more grateful than ever that his uncle had always been there for him, no matter how many lectures he had to listen to.

"That's not fair, Sirius," retorted the other man. "How was Dumbledore supposed to know what type of people they were?"

"Well, for starters he could have remembered any one of the hundreds of conversations he had with Lily about them," replied Sirius, his voice losing all warmth. "Don't fool yourself, Hagrid, he knew exactly what type of people the Dursleys were. Dumbledore would sacrifice his own family if he thought it would help him achieve some noble goal. We learned that back in the Order."

Harry knew the name Dumbledore from Ginny's letters. She had told him all about Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Ginny had seemed almost in awe of the man and his reputation, and it sounded like her brother Ron nearly worshiped the ground that Albus Dumbledore walked on. From the sound of it, Sirius did not hold the man in the same high regard.

"That's not true, Sirius," argued the man Hagrid. "Dumbledore is a great man and he's done a lot for all of us."

“Ask the Longbottoms how much he did for them,” Sirius said flatly. “Better yet, ask James and Lily.”

Silence filled the room, but Harry barely noticed it. James and Lily were his parents’ names. Obviously there was some connection between them and Albus Dumbledore that Harry was unaware of. Harry knew that his mother and father had been killed when he was very small, but that was about it. Sirius had promised to tell him the whole story when Harry turned eleven. Now, with only a day to wait, Harry felt the need to hear that story more than ever.

“Enough of this, Hagrid,” Harry’s uncle said finally. “None of this is your fault, and I must admit that Dumbledore has done right by you. I know Dumbledore’s heart is in the right place it’s just his methods I’ve never agreed with. Enough of this though, you’ve a letter for Harry and he deserves to see it. I’ll be right back.”

Before Harry could so much as move, Sirius stepped through the doorway and looked down at him. Dread filled Harry’s chest at the thought of him getting another lecture, but Sirius only winked at him and put a finger to his smiling lips. Walking away from the door, Harry’s uncle made a show of calling upstairs for Harry while motioning for him to come closer.

“You heard everything?” Sirius whispered to Harry.

Harry nodded, still not sure if he was going to be in trouble for eavesdropping. “Good. You deserve to know the truth, no matter what Dumbledore might say in his letter. Now, I want you to come stomping down the stairs in a few. Get moving.”

With that, Sirius called up the stairs for Harry again. He actually used Harry’s full name so that the sound of his voice would cover the sound of Harry’s footsteps as he headed back up the stairs. Once at the top, Harry called down that he was coming before stomping down the stairs so loudly that Sirius had to stifle a laugh behind his hand.

“’bout time, boy,” Sirius said sternly, but the fact that he stuck his tongue out at Harry a moment later rather ruined the effect.



“Sorry,” Harry replied with as even a voice as he could manage. “I was in the bathroom. You know how I get after eating your cooking, I can’t help it.”

If Sirius wanted to play, Harry could play as well. This was a fact that was not lost on his uncle as Sirius went red in the face in an attempt not to burst out laughing. They spent ten minutes in the hallway having a mock argument over the merits of cooking lessons versus the rising cost of toiletries. When neither could take it anymore, they hugged and Sirius ruffled Harry’s hair with a final wink.

“We’ll finish this conversation later,” Sirius said trying to sound as stern as possible. “We have a guest from Hogwarts and I want you to meet him. Try not to embarrass him with your personal problems.”

“I won’t, Uncle Sirius,” Harry said innocently before sticking his tongue out at his uncle.

Together they walked back into the family room, once again Harry was struck by how large their guest was. The man, with his bushy black hair and beard seemed to make the entire room seem smaller just by his presence. The man’s hands alone seemed large enough to wrap completely around Harry’s head. Harry felt more than a little nervous as he looked up into the man’s bearded face. Oddly, once he saw the man’s kind eyes looking down at him, Harry suddenly felt at ease around him.

“Hello, sir,” Harry said politely, holding out his hand. “I’m Harry, and you are?”

“Rubeus Hagrid,” said the large man with a wide smile, “Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It’s good to see you again, Harry.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but have we met before?”

Hagrid, as Harry now thought of him, glanced over towards Sirius for a moment before he smiled back down at Harry. “That we have,

Harry. I was there the night that your uncle here brought you home for the first time.”

“Really?” said Harry, feeling a bit excited by the news. “Uncle Sirius has told me about my parents being killed that night, but I didn’t know anyone else was there.”

“Hagrid actually got to your parents’ house before I did,” Sirius said quietly. “He was the one that took you from the house. When I arrived he was just coming out of the house with you sleeping in his arms.”

“That you were,” Hagrid said with a chuckle. “No bigger than my thumb you were, and so deep asleep that you could have slept through...”

Hagrid’s eyes darkened as he trailed off. Harry knew what the gigantic man was thinking. Harry could have slept right through his parents’ murder. Although sometimes late at night, when he tried really hard to remember, an image of a bright green light and a woman’s screams would keep Harry awake for hours. That memory alone made Harry think that he had not been asleep that night.

“Anyway,” continued the giant of a man, “your uncle and I took you to see Dumbledore. He decided it was best if you went to live with your uncle.”

“That’s not exactly how I remember it,” snorted Sirius. “The way I remember it, Dumbledore didn’t think I was the right man for the job.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry, looking at his uncle.

“Dumbledore needed a bit of coaxing before he would let you come live with me,” Sirius said after a moment’s hesitation. “At first he wanted you to go live with relatives of your mother’s. They were horrible people though, and your parents had been very firm in their desire that should anything happen to them, you would come to live with me.”

“So, I have other relatives?” Harry asked, understanding at last how he had almost come to live with the Dursleys.

“Yes you do,” sighed Sirius. “You have an aunt, and a cousin for that matter. There is also your aunt’s husband, although I hate to think of him as your uncle. As I said though, your mother and father never wanted you to be left in their care. Maybe I should have told you about them before, but even if you had known about them, neither would have wanted to meet you. Petunia Dursley, your aunt, does not approve of magic and hates everything having to do with it. Petunia Dursley hated her sister, your mother, and I doubt she would be overly fond of you either.”

Harry let that sink in for a moment. It was hard to imagine that he had an aunt out in the world somewhere. The fact that she hated him was easier to believe, since most of the adults he had met in his life seemed to dislike him. Only recently had he met started to meet adults that thought of him as something more than an orphan and a possible troublemaker.

“The night your parents were killed,” Sirius continued, “Hagrid was instructed to take you to your aunt’s house. It was Dumbledore’s intention to leave you there, contrary to what your mother and father wanted for you.”

“Why did he want to do that?” Harry asked with a feeling of dread.

“He was just trying to do what was best for you, Harry,” Hagrid said softly, but he did not sound completely convinced of what he was saying.

Sirius let out a harsh barking laugh before speaking again. “More like he was looking to make sure you were tucked away nice and quiet. Dumbledore claimed that he could protect you better if you stayed with your aunt and her family, but I think he just wanted you as far away from the magical world as possible. I can’t say for sure since he has never answered any of my owls or my requests to meet with him.”

“Now, Sirius,” Hagrid said defensively. “Dumbledore is a busy man.”

Harry’s uncle rubbed at his tired eyes with his hand before nodding. “I can’t argue with that, Hagrid, but I doubt very much that it was just his schedule that kept Dumbledore from answering my questions. Harry, I don’t want you to think badly of Dumbledore. I believe that he wants the best for you, I just don’t agree with how he wants to go about it. He’s still a great man, Harry, and he’s done a lot for the magical world.”

Harry was not sure how he would feel about Dumbledore if he ever met him. From what he had heard so far, it did not seem to Harry as if the man were someone he would ever trust. As he was lost in his thoughts, Sirius handed Harry a sealed envelope. His thought suddenly back in the moment, Harry recognized the letter from Ginny’s description of the one her brother had received. It was his letter from Hogwarts.

Tearing the letter open Harry read the invitation and the enclosed book list as if he were drinking in the words. When he had not received it when Ginny’s brother had gotten his, Harry had feared that he was not really a wizard. Now he held his letter in his hand and Harry knew it was true. He was a wizard just like his uncle, and more importantly, just like his parents.

“We’ll be heading into London in the morning,” his uncle said in a tired voice. “We’ve got to pick up your school things. That means it’s time for you to get some sleep.”

Still in a daze at finally getting his Hogwarts letter, Harry nodded to his uncle and Hagrid before turning and leaving the room. He had just reached the bottom of the stairs when he heard his uncle and Hagrid begin talking again. He knew he should go to bed, but Harry was curious about what the two men would talk about now that he was out of the room. Once again he crept back to the shadows by the doorway to listen.

“You are welcome to stay in the guest room tonight, Hagrid.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, Sirius,” said Hagrid. “It’s a foul night out tonight and I wasn’t looking forward to another ride on the Knight Bus. That driver takes a few too many chances on a dry road for me to be trusting him on a wet one.”

“Not a problem, Hagrid,” Sirius replied with a chuckle. “You can ride with us into London tomorrow and Floo back to Hogwarts from there.”

“That’s right kind of you,” said the large man. “I need to ask you something though. How much about that night does Harry know?”

Harry’s ears perked up at the question as his uncle replied. “Not very much. Our benefactor suggested I wait to tell him the details until he turned eleven. Considering everything else he did for us, I didn’t feel it was an unreasonable request. I plan on telling Harry everything tomorrow night when we get home. It’s late though, and I feel the call of a warm bed in my bones. I’ll show you to the guest room.”

Harry scrambled from his hiding place and took the stairs two at a time in his rush to not be found. He had hoped to find out more, but the fact that his uncle was going to tell him everything the next night filled Harry with an abundance of energy. Sleep was now the last thing on his mind. Instead he pulled out pen and paper to write to Ginny about everything he had just learned. Thirty minutes later when Sirius looked in on him, Harry was still frantically writing to Ginny.

“Writing to Ginny?” Sirius said sitting down on the foot of Harry’s bed.

“Yeah,” Harry said with wide grin. “There’s so much to tell her.”

“I’m sure there is,” Harry’s uncle said with a smile. “Finish it in the morning though. You need your sleep tonight. We’ve a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Harry said, trying to stifle a yawn.

Five minutes later, the candles vanished and his room was quiet except for the occasional sound of thunder in the distance. Harry

fought to stay awake a few minutes longer. Using a penlight he had bought down at the local shop, Harry frantically tried to finish his letter to Ginny. Sirius was right, tomorrow was going to be a long day, but Harry figured he could always sleep in the car while they drove. What was important now was getting the last bit of what he had learned that night on paper.

My uncle promised to tell me everything tomorrow night when we get home from London. I don't know what he's going to tell me, but it must be really important. Sometimes I think everyone knows more about my life than I do. Even you sometimes say things that make me think you know something I don't. Whatever it is, maybe it will explain why a man like Dumbledore wanted to make sure I was protected.

The other thing I want to know is who this benefactor Sirius was talking about is. My uncle sounded very serious when he mentioned him. That must mean whoever this person is, he is very important. I don't think he was talking about Dumbledore, not after the things he said about him. It has to be someone else that I haven't heard about yet. Maybe that will be something else Sirius will tell me about tomorrow night. At least I hope so

Anyway, it's very late right now and the batteries in my penlight are starting to fade. I wish your family hadn't already done all their shopping already. It would have been nice to see you in London. At least now I know I'll get to see you on September 1st when I leave for Hogwarts. I'll write more after I talk to Sirius.

Till then,

Harry

Turning off the light, Harry stuffed the letter into his nightstand along with his pen and penlight. A moment later he was looking out his window from his bed, watching the lightning flicker in the distance. For some reason, the flickering light reminded him of something else he remembered from the night his parents died. It was a very faint memory, but the way the lightning sparkled on the raindrops on his window reminded Harry of light on a crystal. Why that was important, Harry could not say. Whatever the reason, as he drifted off to sleep

Harry remembered someone standing over his crib and looking down at him. Before he could see who it was though, sleep claimed him completely and pulled Harry down into a dreamless slumber.

## Chapter 5: Gringotts Bank

Harry awoke the next morning like a cork shooting from a bottle. He was cleaned up and dressed in record time, even managing to beat Sirius down to the kitchen. He waited impatiently for ten minutes before his uncle arrived to cook breakfast. Hagrid joined them a few minutes later with a cheery smile and a warm greeting. The three of them ate a quick breakfast while Hagrid told Harry funny stories about drunken centaurs and how he had always wanted a dragon when he was growing up. Sirius remained quiet, though he sometimes laughed at some of Hagrid's more wild tales.

"Come on, you lot," Sirius said after they had finished eating and cleaning up the dishes. "If we don't get on the road now, we'll never make it to London."

Harry was too excited to argue and he almost flew out of the house. He wondered how Hagrid would fit into his uncle's car, but Hagrid seemed to slide into the front seat with no problem at all. Harry couldn't tell if Hagrid had suddenly shrunk or the car had suddenly grown. It was only when he slid into the backseat behind Sirius that he realized that the car had been enchanted to accommodate Hagrid's massive frame. The entire inside of the car seemed larger now, and Sirius seemed to be sitting much farther away than usual.

Like their breakfast, Hagrid spent most of the trip telling stories that soon had Harry's sides aching from laughing so hard. Harry found that he could not help liking the strangely wild, yet gentle, man the more time he spent with him. By the time they reached London, Harry felt as if he had known Hagrid for years and would have trusted him with his life if need be.

"Here we are," Sirius said as he parked the car on a side street. "I haven't been here in ages."

Harry was confused at first because all he could see were ordinary shops on either side of the street, which the signs told him was Charing Cross Road. Suddenly, on the side of the road closest to them, Harry noticed a rundown looking pub that had not been there a



moment before. Sirius and Hagrid walked directly towards the old pub. They seemed rather happy to see its dirty windows and badly hung door. Harry on the other hand was not as happy to see it. He had imagined the entrance to Diagon Alley to be a beautiful and shining example of magic, not a pub that looked like it should have been condemned years ago.

“Uncle Sirius,” Harry said as his uncle reached the door. “What is this place?”

“This, Harry, is the Leaky Cauldron,” said his uncle with a smile. “This is one of the few places in the entire world that I think of as a home away from home. Will you be heading back to Hogwarts now, Hagrid?”

“I’ve a bit of business for Dumbledore to take care of at Gringotts,” said the large man. “After that I’ll be making my way back to the school.”

Without another word, just a nod to Hagrid, Sirius opened the door and led them all inside. Harry, followed closely by Hagrid, stepped inside the dark and shabby pub. There was a bar on one side of the room with a number of tables spread about the center. The wall farthest from the bar was completely taken up by a large and rather handsome staircase, by far the cleanest thing in the room as far as Harry could see. Of course there was a sense of warmth and comfort that seemed to fill the room, but it was nothing like the Muggle buildings that Harry was used to.

If Harry had to say what it was about the pub that he did not like, he would have to say the feeling of great age. Normally he liked old things, like the artifacts at the museum, but this was different. Here it was as if time had stood still. The building reminded Harry of historical movies he had seen on the television with his uncle. He almost expected to see a serf come running in from the fields. Harry tried to swallow all of this as he looked around. His uncle had raised him better than to be so judgmental.

“Uncle Sirius,” Harry said, tugging on his uncle’s sleeve. “Is there a reason why this place looks so... old?”

Sirius and Hagrid both laughed at Harry’s question before Sirius answered. “This place is old, Harry. Tom, the owner, well he’s old too and I don’t think he can clean it as well as he used to. Back in its day though, the Leaky Cauldron was the best pub and inn anywhere in London.”

“So it didn’t always look like this?” Harry said looking around.

“Well, I’m thinking it’s looked like this for a while,” Hagrid chuckled. “When you’ve been too long out in the Muggle world, this place can be a right pleasant sight for weary eyes.”

“Hagrid,” said an old man behind the bar. “Who’s this you’ve brought with you today?”

Before Hagrid could answer, Sirius stepped in front of Harry and smiled at the old man. “I know it’s been a while, Tom, but I would have thought you would still remember me?”

“Well I’ll be,” chuckled the old man. “Young Sirius Black back after all these years. Come to stay with us again?”

“Not this time I’m sorry to say, Tom,” Harry’s uncle said, walking over to shake hands with the old bartender. “I had some shopping to do and thought I would stop in to say hello to an old friend.”

The two men talked about old times for a while as Harry looked around the inn. The more he looked around, the more Harry liked the old pub. Hidden all around the room were pictures of former guests, hung up on the wall and waving out at him. Then there were the people, witches and wizards of all ages that seemed happy to sit and talk with the other patrons. It was actually a very nice place once you got past the first impression.

“Come on, Harry,” Hagrid finally said. “Time we were on our way.”

Harry could feel the change in the room immediately. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched the witches and wizards turning to look at him. He also saw the look on his uncle's face which said plainly that Sirius was not happy that Hagrid had used Harry's name. With only a passing farewell to the old barkeep, Sirius led both of them out the back and into a small courtyard behind the bar.

"Don't use Harry's name in public, Hagrid," Sirius said in a cold flat voice.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," said the large man. "I didn't even think about it until it was too late."

"What's wrong with saying my name?" Harry said, confused by his uncle's anger.

Sirius looked down at him and sighed. "I guess that's something else I have to explain to you tonight. I will tell you all about it though, I promise."

Harry nodded, although he was starting to get tired of waiting for the explanation that his uncle kept telling him was coming. There was a part of Harry that wanted to make his uncle explain it all to him right then. Still, Sirius had never broken a promise to him before, so Harry swallowed his questions and nodded.

Pulling his wand out, Sirius tapped a brick in the wall of the courtyard. Harry was amazed as he watched an arched doorway suddenly appear in the wall. Beyond the doorway was a bustling and brightly colored street filled with all sorts of oddly dressed people and vividly decorated shops. It was incredible, and Harry just wanted to look around at all the strange sights, to take in all the odd smells. From the colorful stands to the brightly decorated shops, it was all so new and amazing to Harry.

"Our first stop is Gringotts," Sirius said as he led them all towards a large building in the distance. "I've been living off of Muggle money for so long that I'll have to get a few Galleons out of my vault."

“What are Galleons?” Harry asked as he watched a woman in a long purple cloak walk by.

“Wizard money,” Sirius said with a smile. “Where Muggle money is mostly paper, Wizards use real gold coins.”

Sirius proceeded to tell Harry all about Wizarding money as they walked past the shops towards the large building at the intersection of Diagon Alley and another smaller street. Living in a Muggle village, Harry had never had to use Wizarding money before, so it all sounded rather confusing to him. Not that he was really paying that much attention. Instead, his attention was drawn to the building in front of them, and the guard outside of it.

At first Harry thought the guard was just a short man, but the closer they got to him the more Harry realized that the guard was not human at all. The guard had extremely long hands and feet, not to mention long pointed ears, but it was his slightly slanted eyes that really proved he was not human. Harry could not have said what it was that made the guard’s eyes look so alien to him. Maybe it was the obvious look of dislike, but Harry was used to that.

“Uncle Sirius,” he said in a timid whisper, “that guard’s not human.”

“No,” answered Sirius. “He’s a goblin. Gringotts is run by goblins, and they take their job very seriously.”

As they entered the bank, Harry saw a second set of silver doors inside the first. Engraved on this second set of doors was a message that Harry realized explained the Goblin’s attitude perfectly.

Enter, stranger, but take heed of what awaits the sin of greed, for those who take, but do not earn, must pay most dearly in their turn. So if you seek beneath our floors a treasure that was never yours, thief, you have been warned, beware of finding more than treasure there.

A cold shiver ran down Harry’s spine as he imagined exactly what might await the thief who was foolish enough to break into Gringotts.

In his opinion, a thief would have to be mad to even attempt it, and Harry was rather glad that he would never be in a position where he would have to try.

“Alright there?” Sirius asked looking down at Harry.

Harry nodded and continued to follow as they made their way through the doors and into an immense marble room filled with people and goblins. The goblins were for the most part sitting at windows talking to people about one thing or the other. There were more windows than Harry could count, and each was filled with a goblin waiting to talk to a customer. Sirius located an available goblin and made his way over to talk to him.

“My name is Sirius Black,” he said to the goblin. “I need to take some money from my vault.”

The goblin nodded at Sirius before looking over at Hagrid. “Are you with them?”

“No, sorry, I’m here on Hogwarts business,” said Hagrid as he rummaged through his pockets until he finally handed a letter to the goblin. “It’s about the you-know-what in vault you-know-which.”

The goblin took the letter from Hagrid with an annoyed sounding sigh. Harry could not help but smile at him, understanding very well how it felt when people tried to keep secrets from him. The goblin opened the letter and nodded before glancing up, catching sight of Harry and freezing in his tracks. At first the goblin looked as if he were about to say something, then he thought better of it and motioned for Harry and the others to follow. They stepped through a large wooden door and into a tunnel that looked as if it were carved from solid stone. Once they were inside, and the door closed, the goblin stopped and turned to face them again.

“I am Griphook, Mr. Potter,” he said looking directly at Harry. “I can see that you value your privacy so I will not tell anyone who you are.”

“We thank you for that, Griphook,” Sirius said with a slight bow.

The goblin seemed to ignore Sirius and continued as if he had not heard a word. "Will you be wanting to see your vault today?"

Harry looked up at Sirius for a moment to see what he thought, but Sirius just shook his head.

"That's alright, Griphook," Harry said with a sad smile. "Not today it seems. Thank you for asking."

The goblin seemed rather surprised to be thanked by a wizard, as if it was not something he was accustomed to. Griphook looked carefully at Harry for a moment, as if trying to see if Harry was making fun of him, then the goblin nodded and led them the rest of the way down the tunnel and out onto a platform. Like the tunnel, the platform seemed to be carved directly from the bedrock under the bank. It was very old looking, with the stone at their feet worn smooth by the passage of time and countless customers.

Griphook gave an earsplitting whistle and a moment later two mine carts rolled up to the platform. Griphook and Sirius climbed into the first one, while Harry and Hagrid climbed into the second one. No sooner had Harry seated himself than the carts were moving again. The carts were moving so fast that Harry had to squint to see anything due to the wind whipping past them. He thought about asking Hagrid about the ride, but the large man looked rather green.

It seemed to take forever as they rode through the dimly lit tunnels, over great chasms, and one time through a waterfall of ice cold water. Harry tried to lean over the edge of the cart a few times, trying to see the bottom of the chasms they were traveling over, but Hagrid kept pulling Harry back firmly with a shake of his head. By the time they arrived at vault 711, the Black family vault, Harry thought he had been on the most exciting rollercoaster ride ever.

"Vault 711," Griphook said officially as he climbed out of the cart. "Stand back, please."

The officious looking goblin walked across the short platform to a massive door. With a light touch of his finger, the door slowly opened to reveal a large room beyond. Harry stood in awe as he saw the piles of gold that filled the room beyond the vault's large door. He had never seen anything like it except in movies about pirates and their buried treasure. Sirius did not even seem to notice all the gold except to scoop up several large handfuls and drop them in a bag tied to his belt. Without another word, Sirius stepped back out of the vault, the doors sealing behind him.

"Back in the carts, please," Griphook said, although it sounded more like a command than a polite request.

This ride was much shorter this time; in fact it was over before it had really begun. Harry thought they had maybe traveled two hundred yards before coming to a stop in front of another massive door. "Vault 713," intoned Griphook as he climbed out of the cart again. "Stand back."

"Can I ask you a question, Mr. Griphook?" Harry said after the goblin had touched the door and stepped back.

Griphook looked puzzled for a moment before he nodded his head cautiously. "I will answer if my oath to the bank allows."

"I just wondered what would happen if someone other than you or one of the other people working here touched one of those doors?"

Griphook's face took on a rather nasty grin. "They would be pulled inside the vault, young sir, with no way out."

"So how often do you check to see if someone is in the vaults?"

"Once every ten years," answered Griphook with an even nastier grin.

Harry would have asked more questions but an odd sight distracted him. He had expected Vault 713 to be filled with gold in the same way that his uncle's vault had been. Instead, it seemed to be empty

except for a single bundle of burlap lying in the center of the room. Harry watched as Hagrid scooped up the package and stuffed it into his pocket. Once he had stepped out of the vault and climbed back into the cart, Hagrid clamped his mouth shut and seemed to try and ignore the world around him.

After another wild ride, Harry eventually found himself standing outside on the steps of the bank with his uncle and Hagrid. Hagrid looked pale and sweaty, while Sirius had a look of excitement in his eyes. Harry, for his part, felt like he had just left the best amusement park in the world. If it were not for the fact that Diagon Alley and the shops it contained seemed to be calling out to Harry, he would have said the bank was the highlight of his day. There was also the fact that as they were walking down the steps of the bank, Harry saw a strange man in a turban walking into the bank. There was something strange about the man, although Harry could not have said exactly what it was.

“I’m going to get a drink in the pub if you don’t mind, Sirius,” Hagrid said in a slightly shaky voice. “Just to settle my nerves you understand.”

Sirius chuckled and nodded. “We’ll be at Madame Malkin’s getting Harry’s robes. What say you meet us at Ollivander’s after your nerves are settled?”

With a nod and a wave, Hagrid headed off to the pub while Harry and his uncle wound their way through the crowded street. They were probably halfway to their destination when they passed a store called Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry was drawn to the front window where the most amazing broom he had ever seen was on display. Unlike the one he had at home, with its worn polish and broken bristles, this broom was a work of art. Along the shaft of the broom, in very fancy gold letters, was written, ‘Nimbus 2000.’ Even the name sounded exciting to Harry.

“Come on, Harry,” Sirius said, seeming to take no notice of the broom in the window. “We’ve got lots of things to pick up today.”



Sighing, Harry followed his uncle until they reached Madame Malkin's shop. To Harry's surprise, his uncle showed him inside before saying he would be back shortly. He said he was going to run to the apothecary to get Harry's potions supplies and would be back shortly, but it still surprised Harry. Sirius never seemed to like leaving Harry by himself unless there was someone around to keep an eye on him.

"Hogwarts?"

Harry looked up and saw a pale blond boy standing in front of a mirror as an older woman measured him for robes. The woman looked kind enough, but the boy instantly reminded Harry of the bullies from his school. It might have had something to do with the sneer on the boy's face, or the cold way in which the boy looked at Harry in the mirror.

"I'll be with you in just a few, dear," the woman said pointing at a chair by the door. I'm almost done here."

"So, you are starting Hogwarts this year, too?" asked the boy with a sneer.

Harry nodded, not wanting to actually talk to the boy. He hoped that if he remained silent, the boy would stop talking to him. His uncles had raised him better than to be rude to strangers, but Harry's instincts told him not to trust the boy. Harry tried to think of a reason, but something about the boy seemed wrong, as if he were torn in half. In fact, the longer Harry looked at him, the more he felt that the pale skinned boy was torn between who he thought he had to be, and who he wanted to be.

"My father says that there are better schools but that it is expected of me to attend Hogwarts," drawled the boy. "Of course I'm sure to end up in Slytherin. My family is pureblood, so of course Slytherin is the only house that will do for me. I wouldn't be able to look my father in the eye if I wasn't accepted into Slytherin. It is the only proper house at Hogwarts these days. The other houses let in those other types. My father doesn't believe they should let the other type into

Hogwarts but Dumbledore seems to like them. What's your family name by the way?"

The boy had barely breathed as he had spoken. Everything the boy had said convinced Harry that his original impression of the boy was right. He was not someone Harry was going to get along with. The strange thing was, what the boy was saying sounded more like he was repeating something he had heard repeatedly. Harry was just about to tell the boy his name when Madame Malkin finally finished measuring the pale boy. Without so much as a backwards glance, the boy walked out of the store and was lost in the crowd before Harry had even seen which way he had gone.

As Madame Malkin measured Harry for his robes, he thought about what the boy had said to him. He had assumed that the magical world was a better and more accepting place than the Muggle world he had lived in for most of his life. If what the boy had hinted at was true, then the magical world was just as unfair as its Muggle counterpart. Those thoughts filled Harry's mind for an hour while Madame Malkin took measurements and fitted Harry with a set of robes. Harry was so distracted that he did not even notice Sirius entering the store.

"That's you done, young Mr...." Madame Malkin said, rousing Harry from his dark thoughts.

"I'll take care of that," Sirius cut in before Harry could tell the woman his name.

It always seemed that Sirius was preventing Harry from telling people his name. He supposed it was yet another of those things that Sirius would explain later, along with everything else. Harry could feel his frustrations building with each new question that he wanted answered. The fact that Sirius had promised to explain it all that night no longer seemed to alleviate the feeling that Harry was being purposefully kept in the dark. For the first time in his life, Harry felt a new emotion aimed at his uncle, he felt hate.

"Come on," Sirius said with a smile. "We've got to meet Hagrid and get your wand."

Silently Harry followed his uncle out of the shop. Sirius was now carrying a large cauldron that seemed filled with books and packages. Evidently, Sirius had finished up their other shopping while Harry was inside Madame Malkin's being fitted. He felt slightly disappointed that he would not get to see more of Diagon Alley's shops, but he also felt a powerful need to get home so he could find out the truth that Sirius held.

"Right in here," his uncle said opening the door to a very old looking shop.

Stepping inside, Harry was reminded of an old fashioned shoe store. If the boxes on the shelves had not been too small to hold shoes, Harry would have been convinced it was exactly that. Instead, there was a strange sense of promise in the musty air. It felt like a sense of waiting and time in the room, as if the entire place was waiting for something to happen.

"Ahhh... Welcome to my shop, Mr. Potter, I've been expecting you."

Harry turned and watched a very old looking man walking slowly out of the shadows between two large shelves of boxes. At first he thought the man must be blind, his eyes were a milky white color, but then Harry realized that the man could see perfectly. What he had at first taken for milky white was actually more like looking at two small reflections of the moon. It was a rather disturbing sight actually, and Harry was not sure if he liked this old man.

"How did you know my name?" Harry asked, noticing the look of concern on Sirius' face.

"First of all, allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Ollivander, the owner of this fine store. As for how I know your name, a very old friend of mine stopped by just this morning and told me you were coming," said the old man with a smile. "I believe your uncle knows him."

There seemed to be an unspoken message that passed between the two men, and Sirius noticeably relaxed after a few moments.

“Another mystery that he will have to explain later on,” Harry thought as he looked at his uncle.

“In fact,” continued the old man, “he even suggested the very wand I should have you try first. Anyone else telling me how to do my job and I would have been rather annoyed. I try to make exceptions in his case though.”

Reaching under the counter, Mr. Ollivander pulled out a long box, tied closed with a red ribbon. Sitting the box down on the counter top, the old man untied it and slowly lifted the top off. Inside was a simple wand, not quite a foot long and made of a caramel color. Something about it seemed to draw Harry towards the counter, and the wand. Before he even thought about it, Harry reached out his right hand and lifted the wand from the box. The wood felt warm and alive in his hand.

“Give it a wave, Mr. Potter,” Ollivander said with a smile.

Doing as instructed, Harry waved the wand in front of him. Suddenly there was a shower of red and gold sparks flying from the end of the wand. Harry was so surprised by the display of magic that he almost dropped the wand to the floor, but the wand felt so good in his hand that he could not let it go.

“I think we’ve found you a wand, Harry,” said Sirius with a barking laugh.

“Indeed we have. Holly, eleven inches long with a phoenix feather core,” nodded Mr. Ollivander. “The wand chooses the wizard, and somehow I am not surprised that this wand should choose you.”

“Why do you say that, Sir?” Harry asked as he gently placed the wand back in its box.

Mr. Ollivander put the lid back on the box before fastening the ribbon around it once more. "The phoenix that provided the feather for that wand only provided one other feather. I am not surprised that this wand chose you because the wand that gave you your scar contained the other feather from that phoenix."

Sirius suddenly hurried forward, trying to stand between Harry and the old man. However Harry was not about to have yet another mystery go unsolved. Too many mysteries were floating through Harry's mind. This latest one was the last straw for him, and Harry found himself speaking before he could stop himself.

"Who owned that wand, sir?"

"Harry," Sirius said suddenly. "I think we've taken up enough of Mr. Ollivander's time."

"I want to know the answer," Harry said, his voice filled with all the frustration he was feeling.

"I told you that I would tell you all of it when we get home tonight," Sirius pleaded. "Give me that much more time?"

"I fear, Mr. Potter," the old man said sadly, "that your uncle may be right to want tell you himself. I will say only that I expect to see great things from you, Mr. Potter. The wand is yours, Mr. Potter, my old friend paid for it in advance this morning. Use it well."

Without another word, Mr. Ollivander walked back into the shadows at the back of his store, leaving Harry and Sirius standing alone in the store looking at each other. Harry could not bring himself to speak to his uncle. Instead, he picked up the box containing his wand and walked back out into the sunlight outside the store. To his surprise he saw Hagrid standing just outside the doorway with a large cage in his hand.

"Got you a birthday present, Harry," smiled the gigantic man. "Figured you would want a pet for school and what better pet for a boy than an owl."

Harry instantly forgot his frustration with his uncle at the sight of the magnificent owl in the cage. She was the most incredible creature Harry had ever seen with her snow white feathers. There was an almost regal look to the owl as she looked up for just a moment at Harry before hiding her head under her wing once more.

“She’s absolutely beautiful, Hagrid!”

Taking the cage from Hagrid, Harry could not help but admire the beautiful creature as he repeatedly thanked the giant of a man. Sirius also thanked Hagrid, although Harry barely heard them speaking. He did remember to say farewell to Hagrid as Sirius led him back towards the Leaky Cauldron and their car. Harry sat in the backseat all the way home, the owl’s cage next to him, just watching the sleeping bird. He might have dozed off as his uncle drove them home, because it was some time later when pulled into their drive that Harry noticed anything other than the owl.

“Come on Harry,” Sirius said as he opened the door for Harry. “Take your things upstairs and then meet me in the kitchen.”

The look on Sirius’ face was tired and weak, not something Harry normally saw there when he looked at the man that had raised him. For some reason, Harry felt angry at his uncle because of that look of weakness. Sirius was supposed to be strong and funny, not tired and weak. This was not a feeling that Harry liked, and he quickly pushed it away as he walked into the house carrying his owl’s cage in one hand and his cauldron full of school things in the other.

Ten minutes later and Harry was back in the kitchen. He was surprised to find his uncle Remus waiting alongside Sirius. Both men looked tired as Harry walked into the room and took a seat across from them at the table.

“When did you get home, Uncle Remus?”

“I got back about an hour ago,” replied Remus.

“I think we have other things to discuss right now,” Sirius said in a weary voice. “I promised you answers, and I never break a promise.”

Harry did not say a word as he watched the two men squirming nervously in their seats. Why they should be so nervous was beyond Harry as he watched them. What could possibly be so bad that they would be acting like this? Harry could only imagine that they had something else on their mind than telling him about his past.

“This all starts a little over eleven years ago,” Sirius began. “There was a war going on at the time. Not the type of Muggle war you see in movies. This was a magical war between a group of evil wizards and everyone else.”

“What he means to say,” added Remus, “is that the magical world was under attack by a Dark wizard and his followers.”

“What was the Dark wizard’s name?”

Both men looked at each other for a moment before Remus spoke again. “His name was Voldemort, and he was the most powerful Dark wizard anyone had ever seen before.”

“So what’s he got to do with me?” Harry said feeling a bit confused. “You’ve never talked about a war so evidently somebody beat him. He couldn’t have been that bad.”

Sirius actually choked on the tea he was drinking. He finally stood up and poured the tea into the sink before opening the refrigerator and pulling out two Muggle beers. He popped the tops off both beers and handed one to Remus before looking back at Harry.

“I’ll get to that in a moment, Harry,” he said sitting back down. “Right after you were born, Dumbledore warned your parents that Voldemort was looking for them.”

“Probably because they had messed up some of his plans,” Remus added quietly.

“Probably,” chuckled Sirius. “They were pretty big thorns in Voldemort’s side, and he hated that. Whatever Dumbledore told them, your mum and dad decided they needed to go into hiding. They did everything in their power to hide from him, but something went wrong and Voldemort found them.”

“He’s the one that killed them,” Harry said, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, Harry,” sighed Remus. “He found where they were hiding and took them by surprise one night. He killed them both and then he tried to kill you.”

“Kill me?” Harry stammered. “Why would he want to kill me?”

“Who knows,” growled Sirius. “He might have wanted to kill all of you just as a warning to others not to cross him, or he might have just liked killing. Whatever the reason, he followed your mother up to your room and killed her. Then he tried to kill you, but something went wrong.”

“Or right,” Remus whispered.

“Either way,” continued Sirius, “when he tried to kill you, his spell backfired and it killed him instead.”

Instinctively Harry reached up and touched the lightning shaped scar on his forehead. “How is that possible?”

Remus shrugged his shoulders and smiled sadly at Harry. “No one knows, Harry. Whatever the reason, when his spell backfired it gave you that scar but it killed him.”

“My wand...” Harry began as he pulled out the wand he had tucked into his jeans before coming downstairs. “My wand has a feather from the same phoenix that gave a feather for his wand.”

Remus looked at Sirius for a moment. Sirius nodded and Remus looked back at the wand in Harry’s hand. If Harry had looked up he



would have seen a strange mixture of sadness and awe on Remus' face at this news. As it was, Harry did not see the look on his uncle's face. He could only see the wand in his hand.

"I'm not sure what that means, Harry," Sirius said after a moment. "I don't think it means anything really. That wand chose you but what you do with it is up to you."

For some reason Harry could not bear to hear another word. Standing up, Harry ran out through the screen door and out across the yard. Within a matter of minutes he was sitting in his special place crying silently. Feelings of betrayal and anger roared through his mind as Harry sat there, staring at his new wand through his tears. By the time he had stopped crying, the light of the day had almost vanished and he could just barely make out the light from his house in the distance.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry jumped to his feet and pointed his wand at the sound of the voice that had just spoken. To his surprise, he saw Mr. Knight sitting on the same stump that he normally sat on when talking with Harry. What bothered Harry was the fact that he had not heard Mr. Knight approaching or sitting down.

"How long you been here?" Harry asked looking around. "I didn't hear you."

"That's not surprising," smiled the older man. "I was raised in a heavily wooded area, so I learned how to walk silently when I was a child. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"It's ok, sir," nodded Harry, sitting back down. "It's just been a bad day for me."

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked Mr. Knight, sliding off the stump to sit on the ground to look Harry in the eyes. "Tell me what's going on and I'll do what I can to help."

Over the next hour Harry told his friend everything that had happened to him that day. He told him about his wand, and about a dark wizard trying to kill him. He also spoke of his confusion regarding the mysterious benefactor he had heard his uncle speaking of several times. After that he told the patient man about his feelings of frustration and confusion over the fact that his uncles had not told him about this sooner. They had told him his parents were murdered, but not that some lunatic had attempted to kill him as well.

"They as good as lied to me," Harry said finally. "They didn't think I could handle the truth so they hid it from me."

"They did what they thought was best for you," replied Mr. Knight calmly. "Did you ever actually ask them about how your parents died?"

Harry had to think about that for a moment before he answered. "Well, no. I guess I just figured it was a robbery or something."

"Then they didn't lie to you, did they?" asked the older man. "I must admit my own part in this though."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well," Mr. Knight began softly. "I was the one that suggested your uncles wait to tell you about how your parents died."

"You?" asked Harry, his sense of betrayal building again.

"Yes, me," chuckled the man that Harry trusted almost as much as his uncles. "You see, Harry, I am your 'benefactor.' I was the one that told them to bring you here and keep you safe. I was the one that enchanted the ring you wear around your neck so that no one would notice you unless you revealed your name to them. I am also the one that suggested that particular wand to Mr. Ollivander this morning. So, if you are going to be angry with anyone for keeping things from you, then you should be angry with me, not your uncles. They only did as I asked them to so that you might have a normal life as you grew up."

Harry was completely stunned. Sitting in front of him was the man responsible for so many of Harry's questions and frustrations. Part of the young boy wanted to rage against the man in front of him, and part wanted to ask him even more questions. In the end it was his desire to understand why he must be protected that won out over his anger.

"Why?" he asked finally. "Why must I be protected?"

"Voldemort is not dead, Harry," answered Mr. Knight bluntly. "I know everyone would like to think he is, but it's just not true. He's out there somewhere, plotting and growing stronger. One of these days he's going to return, and when he does, he's going to want revenge on the person who defeated him. That person is you, and I wanted to make sure that you were protected from him from as long as possible."

Harry looked into the man's eyes and felt his anger wash away. Mr. Knight had answered him without trying to protect him or coddle him, he had just told the truth. That fact alone seemed to make the news that a madman wanted him dead easier to accept. At least now he knew the worst of it. Now he could prepare for what was to come.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said with a smile.

"You're welcome, Harry," smiled Mr. Knight. "Now, would you do me a favor?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to go forgive your uncles," smiled the older man. "I'll be there in a bit and we can all sit down and talk, maybe answer a few more of your questions. Is that alright with you?"

"I'd like that, sir," Harry said standing, his face covered in a wide grin. "I'll tell them you're coming."

"Alright," said Mr. Knight as he climbed to his feet. "I'll see you in a few."

With a nod, Harry was off running towards the house in the distance. Mr. Knight watched sadly as the boy finally opened the rear door and stepped inside.

“It’s time for you to take your place in the world, Harry,” said Mr. Knight as he walked over to the property line. “In the end, I guess Albus was partially right about the blood wards. Fortunately, my blood is much stronger than Petunia Dursley’s.”

Reaching out his left hand, the solitary figure pulled a long silver dagger from out of thin air. Claspings the blade in his right hand, Mr. Knight pulled the blade from his clenched fist with a gush of crimson blood. As he watched, the blood began to glow a deep cherry red like hot steel. After a moment the blood suddenly stretched out in a thin line that followed the edge of the property until it was lost to sight. A minute or so passed and suddenly the line burst in to the most brilliantly white light imaginable.

“Hear me, for I command you!” said Mr. Knight in a voice like thunder. “As is my right, you will protect this place. No harm shall befall those within your boundary, and none shall cross you with evil in their soul. So I command you, so shall it be!”

Another bright flash of white light and suddenly all was calm and quiet again. No sign of the line, or of his injury remained as the lonely figure crossed the open ground to the house. At a glance nothing seemed different at all, unless it was the way in which the lone figure seemed to move a little slower or how his shoulders seemed to droop just a bit more. He paused just outside the rear door of the house and seemed to collect himself before knocking.

“Sir,” Remus said with a mixture of awe and wonder in his voice. “We are honored to have you here.”

“Well thank you, Remus,” Mr. Knight replied with a smile. “We’ve a lot to talk about later, after Harry goes to bed. For now, we best not keep him waiting.”

## Chapter 6: The Journey on the Hogwarts Express

Ginny,

How many times do I have to tell you that I forgive you? I understand that your father made you promise not to tell me about what you knew of my life. Really, it's okay, I don't blame you at all. Mr. Knight and my uncles explained it all to me. I mean, I still don't understand it all yet, but at least I know more than I did before. I got the impression that they answered all my questions, but that they were waiting to tell me stuff until I actually asked them. Sort of like playing twenty questions, a Muggle game, and waiting for me to ask the right ones. I'll have to think very hard before I start asking them questions again.

Something else I figured out. Mr. Knight was trying to explain to me how he enchanted my ring so that people wouldn't really notice me, but he didn't say he enchanted it. Mr. Knight says that what he does is he commands things, anything really, and whatever he commands happens. I don't really understand that either, but Uncle Remus seemed to be very interested by it. I was going to ask him why he was so interested but he had to leave for one of his business trips before I could say anything to him. Then Mr. Knight said he would try to teach me how to do it after I've learned a bit of regular magic, maybe next summer.

Anyway, by the time you read this I'll have already seen you at King's Cross Station, but I just wanted to write you before we left. Sirius should be up soon and we'll be leaving shortly after that. I know this will sound a bit foolish, but I really can't wait to see you. We write to each other so much that I feel as if I've known you forever. It's funny to think that we've only ever seen each other face to face that one time at the museum.

There's Sirius calling now. I've got to go but I'll be seeing you soon.

Harry

"Coming!" Harry shouted down the stairs as he folded his latest letter and stuffed it in an envelope.

The last month had been a whirlwind of adventures for Harry. His days had been filled with flying on his new broomstick, the Nimbus 2000 that he had seen in the window. Sirius had actually left him alone at Madame Malkin's so that he could sneak back and purchase it. When Harry had finally headed up to bed that night, the broom had been waiting for him on his bed with a bright green bow tied to the handle. Harry had been so surprised that he could barely sleep that night, his desire to fly the broom keeping him awake until very late. First thing the next morning, before even thinking about breakfast, Harry had thanked Sirius for the best present he could ever remember getting, and then rushed out of the house. He had spent the rest of the morning flying on his new broom, and loving every moment of it.

Even better than his new broom had been the new sense of closeness to Sirius and Ginny. Sirius had been a great source of information since their talk on Harry's birthday, and Ginny's letters had been filled with stories about "the Boy-Who-Lived" that often had him rolling on the floor with laughter. Some of the things that people had written about him were complete rubbish, but just reading the stories gave Harry a sense of how important Voldemort's defeat had really been to them. Between the tales of all the pranks his father had pulled at Hogwarts and the strange things people believed about him, Harry's life seemed to be filled with laughter now. That was a good thing, since he was more than a little nervous about leaving for Hogwarts.

It was only in the last week that Harry had truly started to get nervous about leaving his home to attend the wizarding school. Even with the few spells that Sirius had taught him since getting his wand, Harry was still worried that he would not be as talented as the other new students. Sirius, of course, kept telling Harry that he had nothing to worry about, but his uncle would not tell Harry anything about the sorting ceremony that Ginny had told him about. Leave it to the old prankster to find it all a marvelous joke when Harry thought it was the most frightening prospect he had ever faced.

"Morning, Uncle Sirius," Harry said as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

“Morning, Harry,” replied his uncle, placing a large plate of food in front of him. “You all ready for today?”

“Not really,” laughed Harry. “Not a lot of choices though, unless I want to go to a Muggle school here, and that doesn’t really make me feel any better. You know, you could tell me about the sorting ceremony to make me feel better.”

Sirius let out one of his strange bursts of barking laughter before sitting down at the table. “Now why would I want to ruin the surprise for you?”

Harry would have answered but with a mouth full of food he could only make a rude hand gesture and hope that his uncle got the message. Sirius laughed even harder before diving into his own plate of food. No one ever said Harry’s uncle was a neat eater, but even Harry wondered if the man realized how much like a starving animal he looked like when he ate. Trying not to look at his uncle as the man shoveled his food into his mouth, Harry held out a bit of bacon for his owl, Hedwig.

Harry had spent two days looking through a book of famous witches and wizards looking for just the right name for the snowy white owl. Each time he found one he liked, Harry had asked the owl what she thought of it. After two days of the owl looking at him as if he were insane, Harry had finally stumbled upon the name Hedwig and immediately the owl had flown over and affectionately nipped his ear. Now, Hedwig spent her days flying back and forth between Harry’s house and the Burrow. Unlike Errol, Hedwig was much faster with her deliveries and occasionally Harry had even gotten his reply from Ginny the same day. Hedwig never complained about all the flying and often Harry would fly alongside her until she hit the edge of their property.

“If you are done eating,” Sirius said with a smile, “you’d better get cleaned up and ready. We need to leave in about half an hour.”

“Okay, Uncle Sirius,” answered Harry as he stood up from the table and headed back to his room.

Harry and Sirius had finished packing Harry's things into his trunk the night before. Sirius had made sure that Harry packed all of his books, and then had given Harry a collection of notebooks that his mother had kept about her classes when she attended Hogwarts. After Sirius had gone to bed, Harry had pulled the notebooks back out of his trunk and spent several hours reading his mother's notes, which were mainly about Potions and Transfiguration. The notebooks were crammed full of his mother's handwriting, not to mention someone else's. The second sets of scribbled notes were in a cramped script that Harry could only assume was his father's. After reading them, Harry felt for the first time in his life that he was truly close to his parents. Placing the notebooks back into his trunk, Harry quickly grabbed his things and ran for the washroom to clean up.

A quarter of an hour later found Harry standing next to Sirius' car as his uncle loaded Harry's trunk inside. Harry had tried to talk Sirius into helping him sneak his broom into the school but his uncle had adamantly refused. That seemed rather unfair to Harry considering all the pranks that his uncle had been telling him about for the last few weeks. Now Sirius was refusing to help Harry pull one of his own. Sirius had tried to explain that being Harry's godfather meant he had to be a little more serious about things than he might have been if Harry was just the son of a friend. He went on to tell Harry that he had always tried to raise him in a manner that Harry's mother and father would be proud of. Harry could not argue with that, but it did not stop him from trying anyway.

"Forget it, Harry," Sirius said, guessing his godson's thoughts. "Your letter said that brooms were not allowed, and I'm not helping you get expelled your first day at school. A prank is funniest when you can laugh about it while you're still at school."

"Yes, sir," sighed Harry. "It just seems a waste to have such a fantastic broom and not be able to use it."

"It will still be here at Christmas," chuckled Sirius.



“That’s ages away though, Sirius,” Harry mumbled as he lifted Hedwig’s cage into the backseat of the car.

“You worry too much, Harry,” said Sirius with a smile. “It’s not as if it’s going to disappear as soon as you walk out the door. Just be patient, Harry. You’ll have plenty of other things to keep you busy once you reach Hogwarts.”

Grudgingly agreeing with his uncle, Harry climbed into the front seat of the car and looked out the window as the pulled out of the drive. It seemed strange to think that he would not see his home again for several months. It was stranger still to think that over the next seven years, Harry would be spending more time at Hogwarts than he would at home with Sirius.

With those thoughts on his mind, and not having gotten a lot of sleep the night before, Harry soon drifted off to the sound of the tires’ humming as they sped along. If he dreamt while he was asleep, Harry did not remember it. Although when they pulled into the lot at King’s Cross, he had the sensation that he had been talking to someone or at least spending time with an old friend. That was a very odd sensation to Harry considering he had no friends to speak of except for Ginny.

“Hurry up,” Sirius said climbing out of the car. “Traffic was heavier than I thought it would be and we don’t have much time until the Express leaves.”

Harry jumped out of the car and ran over to one of the stalls where they kept carts for luggage. Rolling it back over to the car he grabbed Hedwig’s cage while Sirius pulled his trunk out of the boot. Soon they were running for the station, Sirius in the lead with Harry close behind. They were almost to platform nine and three quarters when Harry realized that he could no longer see where Sirius was. Harry kept running in the hopes that his uncle had just gotten ahead of him but a moment later he ran directly into someone and found himself laying on top of them.

“I know you said you were going to be excited to see me again,” said a laughing voice, “but I didn’t think you would throw me to the ground when you did.”

Harry looked down in surprise and found the smiling face of Ginny Weasley looking up at him. “Ginny? Where did you come from?”

“Well my brothers all say I was delivered to the house by a crazed salamander,” she said grinning up at him as Harry helped her to stand. “Mum promises that she gave birth to me though.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry laughed.

As soon as she was back on her feet and dusted off, Ginny grabbed hold of Harry tightly in a fierce hug. Harry could not help but blush as he hugged the small girl back. The fact that Ginny’s mother was watching them closely did not help to calm Harry’s wildly beating heart. Thankfully the plump older woman was smiling, so Harry thought he could not be in too much trouble at the moment.

“You must be the boy that Ginny has been writing to so much,” said the smiling woman. “I’m Molly Weasley, and you are?”

“Potter, ma’am. Harry Potter.”

Mrs. Weasley seemed to freeze in place as she took in Harry’s name. Obviously Ginny and her father had not revealed who Ginny was writing to or else the woman would not have looked so shocked. Then again, Harry wondered if this woman was like so many other adults that seemed to think he was some sort of troublemaker. He was about to apologize and leave when the woman suddenly smiled warmly at him and wrapped a motherly arm around his shoulders.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Harry,” She said squeezing his shoulders. “You aren’t here all by yourself though, are you dear?”

“No, ma’am,” Harry said, feeling a little surprised at her reaction to him. “My uncle is around here somewhere but we got separated. Now I don’t know where he is or how to get on to the platform.”

“I’ll show you,” squeaked an excited Ginny. “Follow me.”

Ginny suddenly grabbed Harry’s hand tightly and dragged him towards a solid looking section of wall next to platform nine. One moment they were standing next to the platform with tracks on one side of them, and a moment later an entire new platform and set of tracks had appeared next to them. Harry could still see platform nine on the other side of the tracks, but he got the impression that the people standing there could not see him. Whatever the case, Harry was amazed at the sight that greeted him.

Immediately Harry saw the magnificent sight of the Hogwarts Express itself. Sirius had told him all about the train but the sight of it caused butterflies to start fluttering in Harry’s stomach. Of course the butterflies could have been from the fact that Ginny was still holding tightly onto Harry’s hand. Ginny’s tiny hand in his filled Harry with a sense of wonder and amazement as he followed her across the platform. It was only when they saw his uncle standing next to one of the train cars that Ginny finally released his hand.

“There you are, Harry,” Sirius said with a glance at Ginny. “I see you found Miss Weasley. How are you today, young lady?”

“I’m doing just fine, Mr. Black,” Ginny said with a curtsy.

“She helped me through the barrier, Uncle Sirius,” said Harry with a slight blush.

“I’ve got to get back to my mother, Harry,” Ginny said, once again leaning up to kiss his cheek. “If I can, I’ll try to see you before the train leaves. Okay?”

“I’d like that,” said Harry with a smile as she waved and ran over to where her mother was watching them.

Sirius chuckled before reaching over and ruffling Harry’s hair. “That one has her eyes set on you, Harry. Lucky for you, she’s going to grow up to be a beauty.”

Blushing, Harry could not look his uncle in the eye as he suddenly had a vision in his mind of Ginny's smile. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have her around more often. Glancing over to where she stood with her mother, Harry could not help but smile to himself. The only problem was the fact that Ginny had six brothers, four of which were standing with her now and casting strange looks in Harry's direction.

"Just be careful you don't piss off her brothers," Sirius said as he lifted Harry's trunk up into one of the empty compartments in the last car.

"I'll be careful," whispered Harry, casting one last quick glance in Ginny's direction.

Harry could just make out what Ginny's brothers, the twins Fred and George, were saying to her.

"Who's that bloke, Ginny?" said one of the two boys.

"Someone we need to run off?" said the other.

"You leave him alone, you two," Ginny said fiercely. "Lay one hand on him and you'll answer to me. Got it?"

"Yes, Gin-Gin," the two boys said in unison, playful smiles on their faces.

"Hold still, Ron," Mrs. Weasley was saying to her youngest son. "You've got some dirt on your nose." Before the youngest looking of the Weasley boys could say or do anything, his mother had pulled out a handkerchief and was vigorously trying to scrub the offending dirt from her son's face. The boy, Harry thought the boy's name was Ron, looked mortified that his mother was making such a fuss in front of so many people. The oldest of the boys nodded his head to the others and made his way to one of the forward cars, leaving the rest to laugh at Ron's misfortune.

“You’re all set now, Harry,” Sirius said as he climbed back off the train. “Hard to believe you’re on your way to Hogwarts.”

Before Harry could say or do anything, Sirius had him wrapped in a tight hug that was nearly as embarrassing as Ron’s plight with his mother. Thankfully, the hug only lasted for a moment before Sirius pulled back and nodded to Harry. Harry nodded back before deciding that this was no time to be worried about appearances. Throwing his arms around his uncle, Harry hugged the man tightly as Sirius hugged him back.

“I’m going to miss you, Uncle Sirius,” Harry said quietly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Sirius whispered back. “We’ll see each other soon, so don’t be too glum. Now get on the train. I’ll write soon, okay?”

“I’ll write you tonight and tell you all about it,” Harry assured his uncle as he stepped up into the car. “See you soon. Tell Uncle Remus to write me when he gets back.”

Sirius was about to say something else but at that moment the train started moving so he just waved to Harry. Harry scanned the platform and saw Ginny waving to him, which instantly put a smile on his face as he waved back. She even ran after the train until she reached the end of the platform and had to stop, tears running down her cheeks. Harry was just about to take his seat when he saw someone else standing at the end of the platform. Mr. Knight stood in the shadows at the end of the station. He waved once to Harry before he was lost to sight.

Harry had the compartment all to himself so he took a seat and made himself comfortable. Scrambling up onto the seat, he opened his trunk and pulled out his mother’s Potions notebook again. Making himself comfortable, Harry began to read as he enjoyed once again the sensation that his mother was nearby. After about ten minutes, Harry heard the door slide open and Ginny’s youngest brother stuck his head in the cabin. He was pulling his rather old-looking trunk behind him.

“Mind if I join you?” asked the tall red haired boy. “All the other compartments are full up.”

“Sure,” Harry said with a smile. “You’re Ginny’s brother, Ron, right?”

Ron looked over at Harry for a moment, lifting his trunk up into the overhead rack, before nodding and taking a seat. At first Ron seemed to be ignoring Harry, but after a few minutes he realized that Ron kept glancing at him. Ron seemed to be on the verge of saying something several times but each time he seemed to stop himself. Harry tried to think of a way to draw the youngest Weasley son into conversation, but he could not think of anything until he finally remembered something Ginny had said to him in one of her letters.

“Ginny says you like Quidditch,” Harry said casually. “I’ve never really followed the teams but I play Seeker when I play with my uncles.”

“Seekers have to have a really good eye and reflexes,” Ron said, his face suddenly lighting up slightly. “You have your own broom?”

“Yeah, my Uncle Sirius bought me a broom for my birthday,” Harry said with a wry grin. “He wouldn’t let me bring it with me though.”

“Tough luck, mate,” said the red haired boy. “I have to borrow one of my brothers’ brooms when we play.”

They lapsed into silence again and Harry was starting to think Ron would not speak again when Ron finally broke the silence. “Are you really Harry Potter? I mean... well... you really have the scar and everything?”

Harry pushed aside the hair covering his forehead so Ron could see the lightning shaped scar on his forehead. Ron stared at it for a moment, letting out a long and low whistle before looking away as if he was embarrassed. Harry could only chuckle softly. Most people would have continued to stare at his scar or made fun of him because of it, but Ron seemed was different. Ginny had been right about Ron, he was someone that Harry felt would make a great friend.

“I shouldn’t have asked you that,” said Ron after a minute. “I knew Ginny was writing to someone but she wouldn’t tell me who. When I saw her hugging you on the platform I asked my mum and she told me who you were. I thought she was just teasing me, but I guess I should have known better.”

“It’s ok,” Harry assured him. “My uncle Sirius, he’s my godfather actually, never wanted to make a big deal out of who I was, so I asked Ginny to keep it quiet.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ron agreed. “I guess you are a bit famous.”

“I didn’t even know I was famous until my uncles told me about it,” chuckled Harry. “Up until then, I was just a regular kid.”

“Is it true that you were raised in a Muggle village?”

“Yeah,” nodded Harry. “We lived in a small village near the coast. I attended a Muggle school up until last term.”

“What was that like?” Ron asked with a genuine air of curiosity.

“I don’t know about most Muggle villages,” Harry said after a minute, “but the one I lived in was horrid. When the kids at my school found out that I was an orphan, they didn’t want anything to do with me. I never told my uncles about how they treated me. They think everything was just bright and cheery. I don’t even know how to tell them that the only thing worse than the kids were the adults.”

“Sounds horrible,” said Ron with a look of shock on his face.

“Like I said,” Harry said, trying to ignore the odd look Ron was giving him. “Other villages might be different, and after a while you get used to it.”

“So, what’s the deal between you and my sister?”

The question took Harry completely by surprise. He had assumed that they would talk about Quidditch or Harry's life among Muggles, not what his relationship was with Ron's sister. Harry was trying to think of something to say to Ron when the door to their compartment slid open again and a small pudgy boy stuck his head in through the gap. Harry was immediately interested about what the boy wanted, probably because the young man looked so lost and sad. The boy reminded Harry of himself when people were picking on him back at home.

"Have either of you seen a frog? His name's Trevor, and I've lost him," said the young boy in a pleading tone.

"Who brings a frog to school these days?" Ron blurted out before he could stop himself.

"Sorry," said the pudgy boy, turning to leave, his face turning bright red.

"Wait," said Harry quickly. "Maybe we can help you look for him. My name is Harry, and this is Ron. What's your name?"

The boy stopped and turned back around to look at Harry, almost in disbelief. "I'm Neville Longbottom. Will you really help me look for Trevor?"

"Sure," Ron said, trying to make up for his tactless outburst. "Where was the last place you saw him?"

"I had him when I got on the train but then some boys started making fun of me and Trevor leapt out of my hand and out the door," Neville said, nearly in tears as he spoke.

Harry instantly felt bad for Neville. He knew what it was like to be picked on because you were different. Deciding that he would help the boy, Harry was about to ask another question when the door to their cabin opened again and revealed a woman pushing a snack cart.



“Anything off the cart, dears?”

“Nothing for me,” Ron said, his ears turning pink as he turned to look out the window.

“I forgot my money at home,” sulked Neville.

Harry looked at both boys for a moment before pulling out the small pouch of money that his uncle had given him the night before. “We’ll take a bit of everything.”

Within minutes, and after a few kind words from Harry, the three boys were happily eating the snacks and laughing together. Ron was telling them all about his favorite Quidditch team, the Chuddly Cannons, while Neville was occasionally talking about how he had a small garden of rare plants at home. Harry soaked it all in, enjoying the sense of friendship that filled the room. He was just opening a Chocolate Frog package when to his surprise the frog inside of it jumped out of his hand and out the open window.

“Rotten luck, Harry,” commiserated Ron.

“Yeah,” added Neville. “They’ve only got one good jump in them.”

“The cards are the best part anyway,” Ron said pointing at the card in the package. “Who did you get?”

Looking down at the card, Harry saw the face of an elderly man wearing half moon reading glasses and a long flowing silvery beard and hair. The label on the card said that the man was Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts.

“So that’s Dumbledore,” Harry whispered before turning the card over and reading the back. “Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel.”

Harry reread the card several times before tucking it in his pocket. He was unsure how to feel about the Headmaster after everything he had heard Sirius say about him. Ginny had said that Dumbledore was considered a hero in the magical world and that his word carried great weight at the Ministry of Magic, at least according to her father. Still, if Sirius was right, then Dumbledore had an agenda that Harry was not aware of.

As he was lost in his thoughts, the door to their cabin opened once again. This time a young girl with bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth walked in. She had a disapproving look on her face as she looked at Harry and the others. Finally she fixed Neville with a look that spoke volumes about her displeasure.

“Here I am looking all over the train for your frog and here you sit eating sweets,” she said coldly. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m s-sorry,” Neville replied meekly. “I just got to talking and forgot.”

“Fine,” she said in a very bossy tone. “If you don’t care about your toad then neither do I.”

Turning to Harry and Ron, the young witch examined them both closely for a moment before speaking again. “I’m Hermione Granger, and you are?”

“Really wishing you would leave,” Ron said under his breath.

“What was that?” asked Hermione. “Speak up so I can hear you.”

“He said his name is Ron Weasley,” said Harry, trying to keep the peace. “And my name is Harry Potter.”

Neville’s head snapped around to look at Harry in shock. Harry just smiled back at him and after a moment Neville seemed to relax a bit. Hermione on the other hand was suddenly almost giddy with excitement. She seemed to be bursting with barely suppressed questions that Harry could see in her eyes.

“Are you really Harry Potter?” she finally asked. “I’ve read all about you in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts. Is it true that you defeated You-Know-Who all by yourself as a baby? Is it true that you have a scar from where he cursed you? Do you remember what He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named looked like?”

“Do you mean Voldemort?” asked Harry.

Harry was surprised when all three of his new acquaintances suddenly gasped in shock and horror. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You said his name,” Ron whispered.

“You must be very brave,” said Neville with a nod of his head.

“Not really,” protested Harry. “I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to say his name. No one ever told me, so I just thought it was ok.”

Just as Hermione was going to answer him, the door once again slid open. Standing there with two larger boys was the young boy that Harry had met at Madame Malkin’s. The pale young man still wore the haughty smirk on his face that Harry had disliked before. His two friends looked as if they were just looking for a fight, and they did not care where they found it. Harry had the impression from their clenched fists and furrowed brows that they were happy to let the pale boy think for them.

“So it is you,” said the pale boy to Harry. “They said that Harry Potter was on the train, and this is the last compartment, so it has to be you.”

“That’s right,” Harry said calmly.

“My name is Draco Malfoy,” said the young boy. “These are my friends, Crabbe and Goyle.”

Ron chose that moment to snicker, whether at Malfoy’s name or the obvious effort it was taking his friends to keep up with the

conversation was anyone's guess. Whatever the reason, Draco Malfoy and his flunkies did not see the humor in the situation. The two boys each stepped forward, flexing their fists menacingly. Harry and Ron, and surprisingly Neville, were on their feet in an instant. The six boys were all glaring at each other now, the tension in the air so thick that Harry could feel his hair standing on end more than usual.

"So you think my name is funny, do you?" snarled Malfoy. "I know who you are. Red hair and freckles, you can only be a Weasley. Better watch who you associate with, Potter. You don't want to get mixed up with the wrong sort, and I can show you what you need to know."

"I think I can figure that out for myself, Malfoy," Harry replied with a smirk of his own. "Now get out of here before we make you."

"You and what army, Potter?" sneered Malfoy.

"This army," chimed in Neville, his face looking determined.

"You mustn't fight, Harry," Hermione said forcefully from behind them. "You'll get in trouble before you even get to the school."

Harry turned to look at her, having almost forgotten she was there for a moment. Hermione looked very pale but also determined to do what she thought was right. Harry admired her courage as he turned back to face Malfoy and his cronies. She was right, but Harry doubted Malfoy would listen to her. As if in answer to his problem, two tall red haired boys suddenly appeared behind Malfoy and his friends.

"What's this now?" asked one of the boys.

"These three causing you a bit of trouble, Ron?" asked the other.

Malfoy was just about to say something when he turned around to see the two stocky boys blocking the door behind him. They both wore bright smiles on their faces but Harry could see the smiles did not carry to the boys' eyes. Malfoy clamped his mouth shut and

looked at Crabbe and Goyle for support, but the two boys looked completely lost now that they did not have the advantage of size.

“No problem at all, Fred and George,” Harry said quietly. “Malfoy and his friends were just leaving, weren’t you, Malfoy?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said, looking paler than normal.

Without another word, Malfoy and his flunkies squeezed out between the Weasley twins. As soon as they were gone, Fred and George turned to look at Harry with puzzled looks on their faces.

“You have us at a bit of a disadvantage,” said one of them. “You know our names but we don’t know yours.”

“He’s Harry Potter,” said Ron as he flopped back down next to Hermione. “He’s the one that Ginny has been writing to all summer.”

“Is he now,” said the nearest of the two twins.

“Then we should probably find out what his intentions are towards our sister,” said the other.

Harry remembered Ginny telling him how protective her brothers were, but he also remembered something else Ginny had told him. Ginny had figured out long ago how to tell the two boys apart when no one else could and it was a trick that had earned her their respect. Now Harry quickly glanced at the two boys and noticed the pattern of freckles that Ginny had mentioned was on Fred’s neck right below his left ear.

“We’re friends, Fred,” Harry said directly to Fred.

“I’m George,” Fred said instantly trying to shake Harry’s confidence.

“No you’re not, Fred,” smiled Harry. “He’s George, and you’re Fred.”

The two boys looked at each other for a moment, and then broke into laughter before George finally spoke. "We've been had, dear brother. Ginny has evidently told him our secret."

"What secret?" demanded Ron.

"That's for us to know," started Fred.

"And you to figure out," finished George.

Fred and George sat down with them for a little while, trading stories and sharing some of Harry's snacks. Fred handed Harry a Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Bean which Harry thought must be a nice buttered popcorn until he put it in his mouth and quickly spit it back out. Everyone started laughing as Harry looked up at Fred, puzzled that such a foul tasting candy was included in the box of treats.

"When they say "every flavor" they aren't kidding," Fred chuckled.

"What was it, Harry?" asked Neville, a slight grin on his face.

Harry laughed as he binned the candy. "I think it was rotten egg."

They all sat around daring each other to taste the strange candies until a voice echoed through the train announcing they would be arriving at Hogwarts soon. The twins said their farewells before heading back to the compartment they had been sharing with several friends of theirs. Hermione already had her school robes on but was polite enough to step outside so the boys could change into theirs. Harry thought that was rather silly since they were just slipping the robes over their Muggle clothes, but she seemed embarrassed all the same. Neville had to go get his trunk from where he had left it, but returned a few minutes later dragging his trunk behind him.

Harry's stomach was starting to feel queasy again as the train finally slowed and stopped. The echoing voice told them to leave their trunks on the train, and Harry realized that he was finally at Hogwarts. A new chapter of his life was about to begin, and the queasiness was suddenly replaced with a sense of excitement at the prospect. As he

followed the others off the train and out onto the platform, Harry tried to imagine what the next seven years held in store for him.

“First years!” called a familiar voice. “First years over here with me!”

Looking in the direction of the voice, Harry saw Hagrid standing amidst a growing group of nervous looking children. Harry made his way through the crowd until he and the others were standing right in front of the gigantic man.

“All right there, Harry?” asked Hagrid with a grin.

Harry nodded and followed as Hagrid led them from the platform and down to a small dock on the edge of a large lake. Harry could not see the school yet, and he wondered if it was on an island in the middle of it.

“You there,” Hagrid suddenly called to Neville. “This your frog?”

“Trevor!” exclaimed Neville as he took the frog from Hagrid, stuffing the frog in his robes.

Hagrid got them all safely into the boats and a few minutes later they were on their way across the lake. The water looked like black glass in front of them, the stars in the sky reflecting off the water so that it was hard to tell where the water began and the sky ended. Harry was so focused on the water that he barely noticed when Hagrid pointed out the castle for the first time.

Looking up, Harry saw the castle in the distance. It was enormous as it looked down on them. He had read about ancient castles in books from the library, but he had never actually seen one that was still in one piece. Before him was a castle more magnificent than anything he had ever dreamed of. Words failed to describe it, but that did not stop Harry from thinking it was the most incredible place he had ever seen before.

Harry lost sight of the castle when the boats finally passed into a short tunnel. It only took a moment and then they were in a small

underground harbor were the students riding in the first boats started to climb out and wait for instructions. Once everyone had disembarked, Hagrid gathered them all up again and led them out across the lawn of the castle and up a short flight of stairs to a set of massive doors.

“Right then, everyone still here? Good,” he said raising a massive fist, Hagrid knocked several times on the castle door.



## Chapter 7: Sorting the Future

The massive door slowly swung open to reveal a tall black haired witch in emerald green robes waiting for them. Harry recognized her stern face from the many stories that Sirius and Remus had told him about their years at Hogwarts. This had to be Professor Minerva McGonagall, the Transfiguration teacher and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. Sirius claimed her bark was much worse than her bite, but Harry was hard pressed to believe that from the expression on her face.

“Here are the first years, Professor McGonagall,” said the large man.

“Thank you, Hagrid,” said the stern looking Professor. “I’ll take them from here.”

Harry was completely distracted by the sights and sounds of the castle around him. There was a sense of history that overwhelmed him as he followed the stern woman into the Entrance Hall of the school. The Hall was so large that Harry thought it could hold his entire house, and still have room left over. As they walked through the hall, Harry heard a low jumble of voices coming from behind a pair of large doors. Obviously, the other students were already inside and waiting for them. The professor guided the new students into a smaller room off to the side of the hall.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said the Professor. “The start of term feast will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall you will be sorted into your houses. The sorting is a very important ceremony because while you are here, your houses will be something like your family within Hogwarts.”

Professor McGonagall stopped suddenly as her eyes fell on Harry. She seemed to recognize him, and Harry thought for just an instant he saw the corners of her mouth twitch upward into a smile. Then she seemed to collect herself and clearing her throat, she continued with her speech. The Professor told them about how points were assigned or deducted from house totals based upon their behavior and accomplishments. She also told them about the House Cup that was

awarded at the end of the year based upon the house points. Harry had been more interested in the concept of the four houses and he remembered his uncles telling him how they had been in Gryffindor, as had his parents. After Professor McGonagall left, Harry turned to Ron and Neville to see if they knew anything about the Sorting ceremony.

“Well,” said Ron, his face looking pale, “Fred and George said it was rather painful, but I think they were just winding me up.”

“My Gran said that it was a very serious ceremony and determined how people saw you for the rest of your life,” added Neville as he tried to fix his cloak.

Neither answer really made Harry feel any better about the Sorting, and now he had images floating through his mind that were filled with screaming and people turning away from him. He was trying not to become sick from the butterflies in his stomach when he heard a girl scream. Harry spun around, seeing a large group of glowing translucent figures floating through the wall and over their heads. One of the figures, a jolly-looking man in a monks robe stopped and looked down at the children below him.

“Oh, hello,” said the friendly-looking figure of the monk. “What are you all doing here?”

“We’re waiting to be sorted, sir,” Harry said firmly as he stepped in front of the other students.

“Oh, how marvelous,” beamed the silvery figure. “I do hope that some of you will be sorted into my house.”

Harry wanted to ask what house that was when the ghosts, for Harry assumed that was what they were, seemed to forget all about them and floated on through the wall without another word. It was a rather strange feeling to talk with someone that was long dead, and at the same time it made Harry sad to think that his parents were dead and he had never been able to talk with them. As he turned to ask Neville

and Ron about the ghosts, Harry noticed that many of the students were looking at him with something akin to awe on their faces.

“What’s everyone looking at?” he asked as he looked around at the others.

“I imagine they are all quite impressed that you faced those ghosts so bravely, Harry” Hermione said in a strangely uptight voice. “Obviously they do not realize that ghosts cannot harm the living.”

“Shows what you know,” mumbled Ron.

“Did you say something?” asked Hermione, glaring at Ron.

“I think he asked if it was almost time to go,” answered Neville quickly.

Harry had to fight hard not to laugh out loud at the look on Hermione’s face, or the fact that Neville had thought of a way to cover Ron’s comment so fast. In either case, Harry found it very funny and for a time he managed to forget his own fears about the upcoming sorting that he still felt on the like a weight on the back of his neck. Looking around, Harry saw that many of the children around him were looking just as nervous as he felt.

“Hey,” Harry called out to the frightened looking students around him, trying to sound braver than he really felt. “What are you all so nervous about?”

“What do you care, Potter,” sneered Malfoy.

Whatever else Draco was about to say, it was drowned out as the students around Harry all crowded forward. The room was suddenly filled with babbling voices as everyone tried to ask if Harry was indeed THE Harry Potter. Thankfully, Professor McGonagall chose just that moment to lead the first year students into the Great Hall for the sorting. All thoughts of questions and celebrity were pushed from Harry’s mind as he followed the stern looking woman.

Once they entered the Great Hall, Harry felt his jaw drop at the sight that awaited him. The room was enormous, and seemed to have no ceiling as Harry found himself looking up at the starlit sky far above. That was not the only thing that caught Harry's eye. There were also hundreds of candles floating in the air, just like at home. Then there were the four long tables that ran from one end of the room to the other, finally stopping before a raised area where the teachers sat at yet another long table. Despite all of this, Harry could vaguely make out Hermione whispering about enchanted ceilings and such, but Harry was not listening to her. His concentration was on Albus Dumbledore.

Sitting on a golden chair at the center of the teachers' table sat the man that had almost sent him to live with the Dursleys. He looked kind enough as he smiled out at the students with his eyes twinkling behind his half moon spectacles. Still, Harry remembered his uncle saying that Dumbledore would sacrifice his own family to achieve a noble goal, and that thought made Harry more nervous than any sorting ceremony ever could.

Harry's attention was drawn to the sight of Professor McGonagall carrying a small stool and a tattered old wizard's hat out into the center of the platform. Something about the frayed and dirty old hat reminded him of his Uncle Remus. Many times when his uncle returned from one of his business trips he would be a little worse for wear, and the hat looked like something his uncle would wear on one of those occasions. With that image in mind, suddenly the Sorting ceremony seemed far less scary. A feeling that was reinforced a moment later when a rip in the hat suddenly opened like a mouth, and the hat began to sing.

“Oh you may not think me pretty,  
But don't judge on what you see,  
I'll eat myself if you can find  
A smarter hat than me.  
You can keep your bowlers black,  
Your top hats sleek and tall,  
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat  
And I can cap them all.  
There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,  
So try me on and I will tell you  
Where you ought to be.  
You might belong in Gryffindor,  
Where dwell the brave at heart,  
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry  
Set Gryffindors apart;  
You might belong in Hufflepuff,  
Where they are just and loyal,  
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true  
And unafraid of toil;  
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,  
if you've a ready mind,  
Where those of wit and learning,  
Will always find their kind;  
Or perhaps in Slytherin  
You'll make your real friends,  
Those cunning folks use any means  
To achieve their ends.  
So put me on! Don't be afraid!  
And don't get in a flap!  
You're in safe hands (though I have none)  
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The hall suddenly filled with sound as the students, and many of the teachers, applauded the hat's song. Harry started laughing as he watched the hat's pointed tip bowing to each of the tables in turn. Harry could hear Ron mumbling to Neville about how he had been told by his brothers that they had to wrestle a troll. Harry started laughing again, glad that he would never have to do something so foolish as wrestle a troll. If all they had to do was try on the hat, Harry felt he had nothing to worry about.

"What house are your brothers in?" Harry whispered to Ron.

"Gryffindor," Ron whispered back. "My whole family has been in Gryffindor."

"Then that's the house for me," Harry said with a wide grin.

“What if the hat doesn't think you are brave enough for Gryffindor?” Neville said looking nervously at Harry.

Harry put a reassuring hand on Neville's shoulder and smiled. “You stood up to those three prats on the train, Neville. In my book that makes you more than brave enough.”

Professor McGonagall stepped forward again, a long roll of parchment in her hand. “When I call your name, you will come forward and sit on the stool to be sorted. Abbott, Hannah.”

Name after name was called, and Harry watched as one student after another stepped up and placed the hat upon their heads. Sometimes the hat seemed to make up its mind immediately, calling out the name of the house the student was to join. Other times the hat took rather a long time, as if it were debating where that particular student belonged.

“Brown, Lavender,” called the Professor.

Lavender Brown became the first new Gryffindor of the night, and the students at the far left table roared with excitement as she walked over to join the cheering table. Harry hoped he would be received as warmly when he was chosen, not because he was afraid he would not be picked for Gryffindor, but because he had never had anyone pick him back at home. He had always been an outsider at home because of the secrets he kept, but now he was amongst people like himself and he hoped that would make all the difference.

All of this was playing through his mind until he heard Professor McGonagall call Hermione's name. The bushy haired girl ran forward and rammed the hat down upon her head with such force that Harry thought she might rip the brim right off. A moment later the hat called out to the room that Hermione was a Gryffindor, and Harry heard Ron groan. Harry could only laugh softly at her obvious excitement as she made her way to the Gryffindor table.

When Neville's name was called, Harry leaned over quickly and whispered, "Save Ron and me a seat at the Gryffindor table, okay?"

"Right," Neville whispered back, walking confidently towards the stool.

Sure enough, Neville had barely placed the hat upon his head when the hat called out. "Gryffindor!"

Neville stood back up with a wide grin on his face, then setting the hat back down on the stool he walked over to the Gryffindor table. Harry and Ron both laughed as the smiling boy looked over at them and grinned even wider. True to his word, Neville sat down near Hermione and made sure that there were two open seats left for Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy, Draco," the Professor called out a few minutes later.

Harry watched as the pale young man sauntered up towards the stool and took a seat. He had barely even set the hat upon his head when it nearly screamed that Malfoy had gotten his wish. With a sneer, Malfoy walked over to the table on the far right of the room and took a seat. Harry noticed that the students sitting at the Slytherin table all looked rather proud of themselves for some reason, barely looking at the other tables as they sat talking amongst themselves. More than that, they all reminded Harry of the bullies he had dealt with for most of his life. That thought in his mind, Harry vowed that should the hat try to make him join the Slytherin house, he would immediately leave Hogwarts and never return.

Harry looked around and watched as several more students were called for sorting. Standing in the midst of the quickly diminishing collection of new students, Harry watched two twin girls being called. Each girl went to a different house, one joining Ravenclaw while the other became a Gryffindor. Harry was about to ask Ron about that when he suddenly realized that he was next in line to be called.

"Potter, Harry," called Professor McGonagall.

The room instantly went quiet at the sound of Harry's name. He watched heads turning towards him from every table in the room. Even the Slytherins took notice of him. It was actually rather disturbing to suddenly be at the center of so much attention, but Harry took a deep breath and confidently made his way up to the stool. Taking a seat, Harry lifted the battered hat up onto his head and let it fall down over his eyes.

Well, well, Mr. Potter. So you are the one who told Mr. Longbottom that he was brave enough to be in Gryffindor, said a voice inside Harry's head.

"Well he is," Harry replied in a whisper. "He faced those bullies even though he was scared. I would say that's brave enough."

So would I, Mr. Potter, said the hat, sounding rather amused. Now the question becomes, where should I put you?

"If it's alright with you," said Harry, "I would like to be in Gryffindor with my friends."

Gryffindor you say. Why not Slytherin?

"I'll leave if you put me in Slytherin," Harry said firmly. "They all look like..."

Like the bullies you grew up being tormented by? Not to worry, Mr. Potter, I don't think you would fit in very well in Slytherin. You also showed courage standing up to those bullies today, and once again tonight when you faced your fear of the ghosts and put yourself between them and the other students. With courage like that, I think you had best be in...

"Gryffindor!" finished the hat, calling out the last word to the rest of the room.

Harry could not believe the reaction he got from the Gryffindor table. Neville was standing on his seat, shouting loudly. All the while the Weasley twins were doing a little dance and shouting, "We got



Potter!” as they spun themselves around. As Harry took a seat next to Neville, the other Weasley boy that he had seen on the platform reached over and shook Harry’s hand rather formally. All in all, Harry could not remember a more exciting moment in his life, unless it was the day he received his first letter from Ginny.

“You were right, Harry,” Neville said to him as the crowd quieted down. “The hat told me when I put it on that you were right, and that I was brave enough for Gryffindor.”

“I told you,” smiled Harry, clapping Neville on the shoulder.

As Harry waited for Ron to join them, he looked up at the teachers’ table again. In all the excitement earlier, he had not really looked closely at it. There sat Dumbledore, watching the sorting intently, but Harry had the feeling that the old wizard was looking at him when Harry turned away. Harry was curious about the strange impression but at that moment Ron was called up to be sorted. Ron looked extremely pale as he walked up and took a seat on the stool, placing the hat upon his head. Harry almost laughed aloud as the hat immediately called out that Ron was best suited for Gryffindor. Ron was grinning as he walked over to the Gryffindor table as the last new student was called up for his sorting.

“ Congratulations,” said Ron’s older brother as the youngest Weasley boy sat down next to Harry.

“I’m starving,” was Ron’s reply, but Harry could see that the tips of Ron’s ears were turning red.

The older Weasley brother, Harry thought his name was Percy, looked ready to say something to Ron but stopped when they saw Dumbledore finally stand. The old professor looked as if he was the happiest man in the world as he stood and looked out at the students in front of him.

“Welcome to another year at Hogwarts,” said the old man in a firm but cheerful voice. “Before we begin our feast, I would like to say a

few words, and here they are. Nitwit, blubber, oddment, and tweak. Thank you."

Without another word, Dumbledore sat back down. Harry thought it must be some odd sort of joke but before he could ask anyone about it, the golden plates in front of him filled with heaping piles of steaming food. All of Harry's favorite foods were arranged along the table and he could not wait to have some of every bit of it. The smell alone was enough to make Harry's mouth water. Harry filled his plate, sampling a bit of everything he could reach, all the while listening to the conversations around him.

"That does look good," said the ghost of a man in a ruffled collar.

"Can't you eat?" asked Ron through a mouthful of food.

"I haven't eaten in nearly five hundred years," replied the ghost sadly.

Harry was not really paying attention to the ghost's plight though. His attention was on Dumbledore. The silver haired wizard looked as if he was enjoying his meal. Harry still had the impression that every time he looked away from the teachers' table that someone was watching him. Part of him said it was Dumbledore, but another part of him was unsure. Between bites of his meal, Harry slowly scanned the table and all the teachers there. He had just reached the end of it when he saw two men talking to each other, one of whom Harry recognized due to his strange headdress.

"Who's that man in the turban?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, that's Professor Quirrell," answered Percy. "He's the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. No wonder he looks so nervous. Looks like Snape has him trapped."

"Snape?" Harry asked, as he looked at the man that Professor Quirrell was talking to.

“Professor Snape, actually,” said Percy. “He’s the Potions Master, and Head of Slytherin House. But it’s the Defense Against the Dark Arts position that he’s really after.”

The other man had long and lank black hair that seemed to frame his pale face, making the man’s black eyes look like wells of deepest midnight. It was just at that moment that Professor Snape looked up, and for just a moment Harry looked directly into his eyes. There was a sense of anger in the Professor’s eyes, but there was also something else there that Harry could not understand. Whatever it was, Harry forgot about it a second later as the scar on his forehead suddenly throbbed with a dull ache that made him cringe before it vanished.

“Something wrong, Harry?” asked Neville.

“My scar hurt for a moment,” replied Harry, feeling rather foolish. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it, Neville.”

Harry returned to his meal but he wondered what had caused the sudden twinge of pain in his scar. Whatever it was, it was gone as quickly as it had come. He looked once more at the table with all of the Professors but no one was looking his way now. He was sure that someone had been looking at him before, but he could not figure out who it had been now. He wondered if it was the dark haired Professor Snape, but it had been Professor Quirrell that Harry had seen sneaking into Gringotts on Harry’s birthday. Harry thought carefully about that as he finished his meal and started in on his dessert.

“My mum was a witch, but my da was a Muggle,” said a nearby boy to Neville. “It was a really nasty surprise for my da when he found out. How about you?”

“My gran raised me,” Neville said quietly. “My whole family was afraid I wasn’t magical enough to get in to Hogwarts. My Great-Uncle Algie was always trying to force me to do a bit of accidental magic. Then one day, he was hanging me out a window and accidentally dropped me. I got lucky and bounced all the way to the road.”

“Sounds like a nutter to me,” blurted out Ron.

“Well, he is a bit strange,” laughed Neville, “but he bought me my toad, Trevor, so I forgave him.”

Conversations like that were happening all around Harry. He listened as well as he could to them, trying to gain some insight into the personalities of his new housemates. If he was going to be spending the next seven years with them, Harry wanted to know as much as he could about them.

“You ok, Harry?” whispered Ron.

“Yeah,” Harry said with a smile. “I’m just enjoying my dessert.”

Ron smiled back at Harry before returning to his own dessert. Ginny had been right about her brother. Harry found himself liking the youngest of the Weasley brothers. In fact, so far he liked all the new people he had met. It felt strange to think about it, but Harry already considered Ron and Neville to be his friends. Even Hermione Granger was all right, even if she was a little bossy. As he finished his dessert, he felt for the first time that he was somewhere that would accept him no matter what happened. When everyone had finished their desserts and the plates had once again magically cleaned themselves, Professor Dumbledore stood once again and looked out over the hall.

“Now that we have all finished our meals, I have a few more things I need to say,” began the old man. “There are a few start of term notices to give you. First year students should know that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils, and a few of older students should remember that as well.”

Harry tried not to laugh as he noticed that the Professor was looking meaningfully at the Weasley twins. “I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you that no magic should be used in the hallways between classes. Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of term, and all those interested in trying out for their house teams should notify Madame Hooch. Finally, I should tell you

that this year the third floor corridor on the right hand side is strictly out of bounds to everyone that does not wish to die a very painful death.”

“Is he serious?” Harry asked Percy.

“Must be,” replied the confused looking boy. “It’s odd because he normally gives us a reason why we’re not allowed to go somewhere. It’s strange that he didn’t at least tell the Prefects.”

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song,” said the old man with a smile.

With a flick of his wand, a long golden ribbon streamed out of the end of it, forming itself into the words of the song. “Everyone pick your favorite tune, and off we go.”

Suddenly the room was filled with the most disturbing sound that Harry had ever heard before as everyone began singing the school song. That would not have been so bad if everyone had been singing the same song. Instead, everyone the song to different tunes and the sound of it grated on Harry’s nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. The song seemed to go on forever, until the only two people left singing were Fred and George Weasley, sing to the tune of a slow funeral march. Harry did have to laugh at the fact that Dumbledore actually conducted the last few verses with his wand.

Dumbledore said a few more things, but Harry was so tired that he barely heard a word of it. He barely realized that Percy was calling for the first years before Ron nudged him in the ribs. Standing, Harry followed the rest of the first years out of the Great Hall and into the entrance hall where they climbed the great marble staircase. They climbed several staircases and followed Percy down numerous torch lit hallways before everyone stopped suddenly. A large bundle of walking sticks was floating down the hallway. As Percy stepped forward, the walking sticks started throwing themselves at him.

“Peeves,” Percy hissed to the first years. “A poltergeist.”

Percy was about to say more, but Harry stepped in front of him and looked up at the bundle of walking sticks. He remembered the name Peeves from the stories that his uncles had told him before leaving for school. Suddenly a small little man with a impossibly wide grin, and mischievous dark eyes appeared floating in the air above them.

“Hello, Peeves,” Harry said to the small man floating overhead. “My uncles asked me to give you a message.”

“Oh, and what’s that?” sneered the strange little man.

“I’m to tell you that Padfoot and Moony send their best regards,” Harry said with a wide grin of his own.

Whatever else the poltergeist had expected to hear, Harry’s message was obviously not it. With a strange grin, the small man suddenly vanished again and carried the walking sticks off with him. A moment later they could hear the sound of a cat screeching as if it were being chased by someone.

“How did you do that?” asked Percy as Harry stepped back in line with the other first year students. “Only the Bloody Baron has ever been able to control Peeves.”

“I just gave him the message my uncles asked me to,” said Harry with a yawn.

Percy looked rather confused by that, but he quickly recovered. He led them down several more corridors until they reached a portrait of a very large woman in a pink dress. Harry was just about to ask if they were lost when the woman in the portrait opened her eyes and spoke.

“Password?”

“Caput Draconis,” said Percy.

This seemed to be the right thing to say because the portrait suddenly swung open to reveal a opening in the wall behind it. Harry

followed the others inside to what seemed to be a spacious common room. Percy showed them all to a set of staircases, explaining that one led to the girls' dormitory and the other to the boys'. Harry and the other boys made their way upstairs to a room labeled "First Years" and opening the door they found their things inside. The room contained several large four poster beds, which Harry was quite glad to see since he was so tired.

Without a word, the boys all dressed for bed before turning out the lights and crawling into their beds. Harry was so tired that he was asleep almost the moment he laid his head upon the pillow. It might have been all the food he had eaten, but no sooner was he asleep than he found himself in a strange dream. In the dream he was wearing Quirrell's turban and a voice was telling him that he must immediately transfer to Slytherin House. Harry just laughed and took the turban off. It seemed to be trying to cling to him, but Harry just sat it down on the floor and walked away from it. He swore he could still hear the voice of the turban yelling at him to come back, but Harry ignored it and walked away. The further away he got from the turban, the brighter and cheerier the dream became. That might have had something to do with the fact that in the distance he could see Ginny waiting for him. Whatever the case, Harry slept with a smile on his face that night and by the next morning he had forgotten all about the turban and the strange voice inside it.

Authors Note: Well I'm finally back. I apologize for my long absence, but I had things I needed to take care of that required my full attention. Now that things have settled back down I am happy to bring you yet another chapter in what is proving to be a most challenging writing experience for me. Some have said that I have chosen to remain too close to canon, but that is the whole point of this series, to show that small changes can have monumental outcomes in the end. I promise, we shall start to see more divergences from canon starting in this chapter. There will be many more from then on.

Anyway, enough of my rambling on. Time for you to loose yourselves once more in the story, at least hopefully. As always, I want to thank my two beautiful and talented betas, C & M. Without them, I would sound far less educated and far more like the foolish romantic that I am.

Chris

## Chapter 8: Mastering Potions

The next morning at breakfast, Harry finally realized just how famous he really was. It might have had something to do with all the people looking at him, or it might have been the constant whispering that seemed to follow him everywhere he went. Whatever the case, Harry soon realized that he was either going to have to get used to it or go completely mental. Either way, he had other things to worry about.

Professor McGonagall handed Harry his schedule shortly after he arrived in the Great Hall for breakfast that morning. Harry had never seen anything like it. Three times a week he would attend classes in a greenhouse to study magical plants, not to mention studying the stars at midnight once a week. It looked to Harry as if there was more to magic than just waving his wand and saying a few silly sounding words. He hoped that would mean that he would not be as far behind the other students as he thought he would be.

Things only got stranger for Harry, Ron, and Neville as they spent their first morning just trying to find their way to class. It would not have been so difficult if the castle did not seem to take pride in confusing them. Between the stairways that seemed to lead



someplace different every few minutes, to the doors that only opened when you asked them politely, it was difficult to make it to class on time. The fact that Argus Filch, the caretaker, caught them accidentally trying to get through the third floor door leading to the out of bounds corridor did not help matters either.

Then there were the classes themselves. History of Magic turned out to be the most boring class that Harry and his friends had ever sat through. Professor Binns was the only ghost teacher at the school. The story had it that many years before, the Professor had sat down to rest in the teachers' lounge and the next morning he had left for class, leaving his body behind. Now, he spent his days putting the students to sleep with his endless droning about the Goblin Revolts and wizards that had discovered obscure magical spells.

Charms was a little more interesting, and Professor Flitwick took great pride in his subject. It was a bit funny when the tiny little Professor called Harry's name the first day and got so flustered that he fell off the chair he was standing on. After he regained his seat, the Professor showed them several spells they would be working on that year, all of which Harry was familiar with because his uncles had shown them to him after getting his wand.

Defense Against the Dark Arts had been a subject that Harry had looked forward to, but he was quickly disappointed. Professor Quirrell seemed to be afraid of the topic he taught, refusing to answer many of the questions put to him by the students. Harry had a headache by the time their first class was over, probably due to all the garlic that hung from the ceiling of the classroom. Whatever the cause, Harry walked away from his first class with the nervous-seeming Quirrell with the distinct impression that the man was hiding something from them.

The class that seemed the most interesting was Transfiguration. No sooner had they sat down in Professor McGonagall's class than she delivered a very stern lecture about the topic. Harry still had to wonder when he would see the part of her personality that Sirius said was there. As far as he could see, she was as tough as nails, and brooked no argument when it came to the subject of Transfiguration. He was impressed by her demonstration of turning her desk into a pig

and back again. Sadly, they started off with trying to turn a matchstick into a needle. Harry managed to change his matchstick on his fifth try, a fact that seemed to annoy Hermione Granger greatly, as she had only turned hers a silvery color by then. She continued to look unhappy until she managed to completely change her needle a few tries later.

They were so busy that before Harry realized it, it was already Friday. As he sat with Ron and Neville at breakfast that morning, Harry read over his mother's Potion notebooks in the hopes that he would be better prepared for the class. He had just finished reading the first chapter's worth of notes when Hedwig flew in to the Great Hall with three letters firmly gripped in her claws. The first letter was from Ginny, and Harry quickly tucked it away to read later. The second letter was from Hagrid inviting him down for tea that afternoon. He scribbled a quick reply and sent it back with Hedwig. The final letter was from his Uncle Sirius, and Harry tore it open right away to see what his Uncle had to say.

Harry,

Hopefully you are enjoying Hogwarts as much as I did when I first arrived. I remember my first week there. I got lost several times just trying to find my way around the castle! As a matter of fact, if James had not come up with the idea of making a map of the school we probably would still be lost. Good idea really, and I think that old map is still floating around the school somewhere. It always came in handy when we were planning a prank.

I was looking over the letter you sent me the other day and saw that today you have your first Potions class. I was never fond of Potions, and the fact that you have to take it with the Slytherins won't make it any better. Well, that and Snape. Don't get the wrong idea about him, I may not like him, but your mother was friends with him and always said he was brilliant when it came to potions. Still, your mother's feeling aside, if he treats you badly I'll be having words with dear old Snape. Just try to learn everything you can from him, and keep your head down.

I'll be out of town on business for a few days but Hedwig should be able to find me anyway. Make sure that you write to me if you need me for anything. I might be busy, but I'll be there faster than you can say Wronski Feint if you need me.

Write soon,

Sirius

PS. Tell Miss Weasley I said hello.

"Business?" Harry thought as he folded the letter and tucked in his backpack. "What sort of business? He doesn't work."

Harry was busy thinking the mystery of his uncle's odd behavior when Ron nudged him to signal that it was time to head down to the dungeon for their first Potions class. Harry felt better about the class knowing that his mother had known and liked Professor Snape, but he still dreaded the idea of sitting the class with a group of Slytherin students. From what he had seen of the Slytherins since his arrival at Hogwarts, they made the bullies he had grown up with look rather mild by comparison. The younger Slytherin students tended to be more reserved in their cruelty and snobbishness, but the older students were prone to outright acts of vicious cruelty. However, they made sure to do it away from the prying eyes of the school staff.

The other thing that bothered him about the Slytherins was the way in which they seemed to think that anyone that was not a pure-blood witch or wizard was beneath them. It was a bigoted concept that he found hard to understand since he noticed that many of the Slytherin students seemed to have a hard time using a wand, let alone casting a spell with it. On the other hand, the students that came from mixed families, or were Muggle-born, seemed to have no problems at all and excelled at their classes. That was probably thanks to a desire to prove to everyone around them that they were indeed in the right place.

"Uncle Sirius told me that my mum was Muggle-born and she was the smartest witch of her age," Harry said as they walked down to Potions. "He said she was more powerful than any purebloods. He

says that the pureblood families are growing weaker while the families with fresh blood are growing stronger."

Ron nodded in agreement, "My family is pureblood but my dad says that mine is probably the last generation of it. There aren't enough pureblood left to keep it up."

"That's what my Gran says, too," Neville said with a chuckle. "Of course, she still wants me to marry at least a half-blood but I don't really care. I think I'm a bit too young to be worrying about that right now."

The three boys managed to find the cold and dark Potions classroom with plenty of time to spare. Harry made his way over to one of the tables at the rear of the classroom, trying to ignore the jars of pickled animals that lined the walls of the room, Ron and Neville following close behind. Oddly, Hermione Granger filled the last open seat at their table, rather than sitting at the front of the classroom as she normally did. Harry thought about asking her about that but decided to ignore it and get his notes and supplies ready. He had just pulled out his text and notebook when Professor Snape walked in the door, closing it behind him and marching towards the front of the classroom.

"You are here to learn the subtle art and exact science of Potion making," whispered the Professor. "As there is little foolish wand waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind and ensnaring the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even stopper death, if you aren't as big a bunch of dunder-heads as I usually have to teach."

Harry had written down everything Snape had said in his notebook, not missing a single word although the Professor had never raised his voice above a whisper. Snape reminded Harry of Professor McGonagall in the way that he seemed to draw your attention to him no matter what he was doing or saying. That was probably why Harry suddenly realized that the Professor was looking right at him.

“Potter,” said Snape in a whisper. “What would I get if I added powered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Harry was suddenly grateful that Sirius had given him his mother’s notebooks because he knew this answer. “Combining those two creates the Draught of Living Death, Professor.”

Snape paused for a moment, obviously surprised that Harry knew the answer. “Then tell me this, Potter, what is a bezoar and where would you look for it if I asked you for one?”

“A bezoar is a stone from the stomach of a goat, Professor,” Harry said, remembering this answer from his mother’s notes as well. “It will save you from most poisons, but not all of them.”

Now the Professor looked furious. Snape was looking around at the others sitting with Harry as if he were trying to determine if they were giving Harry the answers. Snape swooped down on Harry like a giant bat with his cloak billowing out behind him in order to hear any whispers that might be coming from Harry’s friends. The Professor’s reaction to his answers was confusing to Harry. Most teachers liked it when you knew the right answer, but Snape seemed enraged by Harry’s knowledge of the subject.

“Well, Mr. Potter,” snarled the Professor, “tell me this then, what is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

Harry debated answering the question at first but something about the way Snape was staring into his eyes made Harry want to answer. He could fail to answer correctly, and Hermione evidently knew the answer if the way she was bouncing around in her chair with her hand in the air was any indication. Still, he did know the answer from reading his mother’s notes, and getting it wrong after learning it from her felt wrong to Harry. With a deep breath, Harry answered.

“There is no difference between them, sir,” he said quietly. “They are the same plant.”

Snape seemed ready to burst as Harry answered, "Who gave you the answers, Potter? Tell me now or it will be a detention for you."

Harry felt rather hurt at being accused of cheating like this. He silently pulled his mother's notebook from his backpack and handed it to the fuming teacher. Snape stared at it for a moment before looking back at Harry.

"What is this piece of trash, Potter?" he snarled, not bothering to really look at the notebook in his hands.

"It's my mother's notebook, Professor," Harry said looking right into Snape's eyes. "My uncle gave it to me before I came to school. He said I should study from it and learn everything I can from it and you because she liked you."

One would have thought that someone had just slapped the Professor across the face. His face, which had been flushed with rage a moment before, suddenly went chalk white. With trembling hands, Professor Snape handed the notebook back to Harry before walking back to the front of the classroom.

"See me after class, Mr. Potter," Snape whispered as he walked away.

Harry hung his head in confusion. He did not know what he had done wrong, but obviously it had something to do with his mother's notes. It did not help that the Slytherin students were all laughing, thinking that Harry was in for a rather nasty time of it. As he sat through the rest of the class, Harry wondered just how bad it was going to be when he talked to Snape after the class. When he finished the potion they were working on in class that day, Harry watched as the others cleaned up their things and made their way slowly out of the dungeon. He quickly gathered up his things and waited for the rest to leave.

"We'll wait outside," whispered Ron, Neville nodding his head to show he would wait as well.

With heavy, slow steps, Harry made his way up to the Professor's desk after all the rest of the students were gone. Snape was standing behind his desk looking at Harry with an expressionless look on his face that reminded Harry of the adults from the village he had grown up in. When he finally stood directly in front of Snape's desk, Harry looked down at his shoes and hoped that he was not about to be expelled.

"Look at me," Snape said quietly.

"Yes, Professor," Harry said looking up at Snape.

"May I see your mother's notebook again?" Snape asked with a strange gentleness to his voice.

Harry pulled his mother's notebook from his bag and handed it to Snape again. The black eyes of the Professor looked over every detail of the cover before opening it and slowly glancing at the first page. If Harry had not known better, he would have thought he saw pain in Snape's eyes. As he looked at the Professor, the pain seemed to become a deep misery as Snape looked up into Harry's eyes before masking his emotions once again.

"You know," Snape said quietly, "you have your mother's eyes."

Snape handed the notebook back to Harry, his hands once again trembling ever so slightly. "I did indeed know your mother. She and I were good friends for a time, but then she met your father and we went our separate ways."

Harry had the impression that there was more to the story than he was being told, but he wanted to hear what Snape had to say so did not dare ask his questions.

"Your mother was a brilliant witch," Snape continued. "She was also one of the kindest people I ever met. She was in Gryffindor, just like you, and yet she ignored the old house prejudices, remaining my friend even though I was in Slytherin."

“Did you know my father as well, Professor?” Harry blurted out before he could stop himself.

Snape’s eyes hardened instantly but then he looked back down at the notebook in Harry’s hands and his eyes softened once more. “I knew him. I will not lie and say that we were anything other than mortal enemies, but that is none of your concern. You said that your uncle gave you that notebook?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, still absorbing Snape’s words about his father.

Snape looked coldly at Harry, “What has your uncle told you about me?”

“Nothing at all, sir,” Harry said quickly. “He just said I should learn from you and that I should make my own opinions of you, no matter how he might feel about you. I got the impression that he was not fond of you, sir.”

“Maybe the old dog learned a new trick,” Snape said to himself before speaking up again. “Yes, I think it is safe to say that he and I are not on friendly terms. Whatever the case, Potter, you would do well to learn everything you can from your mother’s notebooks. She was a superb witch, and if you have half your mother’s talent you will go very far.”

“May I ask you a question, Professor?”

“What is it, Potter?”

“I was trying to figure out who wrote these other lines in my mother’s notebook,” Harry said opening the notebook to one of the pages with the most writing. “I was thinking it might have been my father’s handwriting. Some of the things he has written are very helpful to understanding the Potions text.”



Once again there was a deep sense of pain in Snape's expression, and then it was gone. "That is not your father's handwriting, Potter. As far as I know, he was only ever fair at potions."

"Then whose handwriting is it, sir?"

"I'm sorry, Potter," Snape said turning away, "I have a staff meeting in a few minutes so I will have to ask you to leave now so I may get ready."

Harry understood that he was being dismissed and without another word he put his mother's notebook back in his bag and turned to leave. He was just closing the classroom door when he thought he caught a flash of something bright silver from the classroom. Harry pulled the door closed so that there was just a crack remaining, and then he peeked back into the classroom. He could still see Snape standing with his back to the door but he could not see what the silver thing might have been. He was just about to close the door the rest of the way when he heard a somewhat familiar voice from inside the room.

"Still, Severus?"

"Always," answered Snape.

Harry wanted to hear more but just then Ron and Neville walked over to him. Harry silently closed the door the rest of the way before they could see what he was doing. Joining them, the three boys made their way out of the dungeon and up into the main castle. They were just about to head for Hagrid's for tea when Hermione Granger stopped them in the Entrance Hall.

"I hope you didn't lose Gryffindor any points because you got those answers from that notebook," she said in a very self righteous tone. "He would be quite right to take points from you considering it was not your own work."

“It’s my mother’s notebook,” Harry said flatly. “Actually, Professor Snape said I should learn everything I can from her notes because she was a very gifted witch. Not that it’s any of your concern.”

“You’re just upset because Harry knew the answers before you did,” snapped Ron.

“Yeah,” agreed Neville. “Don’t pretend like you care about house points. You just don’t like not being first at everything.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide with shock at the boys’ words. Harry thought she might be about to say something else, but he ignored her and proceeded to lead Ron and Neville past her and out the front door. Part of Harry felt bad for treating Hermione like that, but her attitude towards his mother’s notebook made him angry. It was almost as if she were saying that his mother was somehow to blame for Snape’s behavior.

Harry tried not to think about Hermione Granger again as he and his friends made their way to Hagrid’s little hut. He still remembered all of Hagrid’s wild tales of the creatures the wild man had tamed, and he hoped maybe he could convince the gamekeeper to tell him some more stories. With that thought in mind, Harry arrived at the hut and knocked on the door firmly. There was a sudden eruption of sound from inside the hut as what sounded like a very large and vicious dog began barking.

“Hang on! Quiet down, Fang,” roared Hagrid as he opened the door. “Hello, Harry. Who’s this with you then?”

“Hello, Hagrid,” replied Harry with a grin. “These are my friends, Ron and Neville. I hope you don’t mind but I said they could come along to meet you.”

“Not at all, Harry,” chuckled Hagrid. “Come on in, you three. Don’t mind Fang, he’s just showing off, but he’s all bark and no bite.”

Fang, it turned out, was an enormous black boar hound. The dog’s head was level with Harry’s shoulder and the moment Hagrid let go of

his collar, Fang pounced on Ron and began licking his face and ears. Harry and Neville could only laugh at the sight of the large dog as Ron struggled to free himself. As Hagrid started a kettle on to boil for tea, Neville tried to pull Fang off Ron, but all he accomplished was both boys being knocked to the floor with Fang pinning them down with his gigantic paws. Fang seemed quite happy to divide his time between licking both boys faces until they looked as if they had just taken baths.

Looking around the hut, Harry immediately got a sense of comfort. The room was filled with furniture that looked five sizes too big, including a bed that looked as if four regular sized people could sleep on it without ever touching. From the ceiling hung wild game and vegetables from Hagrid's garden outside, not to mention thick coils of rope and a crossbow that looked taller than Harry. All in all, Harry liked Hagrid's home, and by the time their tea was ready he thought it was one of the nicest places he had ever been.

"Gerroff them, Fang," Hagrid said as he pulled the dog off the two boys. "Tea's ready."

Ron and Neville looked like relieved to get Fang off their chests as they climbed up onto the oversized chairs. Soon they were all talking about their first week at school. Hagrid told Ron a funny story about chasing Fred and George out of the Forbidden Forest their first year. Then, Hagrid told Neville that he had known the boy's parents many years before, although he was rather vague about where he had known them from.

All in all, Harry had a great deal of fun talking to Hagrid about his parents and their years at Hogwarts. Neville also heard stories about his family, and Ron, his many brothers. While the two boys talked with Hagrid, Harry noticed a newspaper clipping on the table and picked it up to read. It was all about a break in at Gringotts that Ron had told him about earlier in the week. What Ron had not mentioned was the date of the break in attempt, Harry's birthday.

"Hagrid?" Harry said suddenly. "This break in happened on my birthday, maybe while we were there."

“Oh, I’m sure it has nothing to do with what we were doing there,” said the large man, although he did not look at Harry as he said it.

“But it says here that they tried to break into vault 713,” Harry said stubbornly. “That’s the vault that you emptied of that...”

Hagrid cut him off before Harry could say another word. “Trust me, Harry. What was in that vault had nothing to do with you. You would be better off forgetting about it.”

“But...”

“No buts, Harry,” Hagrid said firmly.

Ron and Neville watched, looking slightly puzzled by the conversation between Harry and Hagrid. Harry could tell that Hagrid would not be drawn into revealing anything else, so he dropped the topic and decided to ask Hagrid the other question that was on his mind.

“Professor Snape said that he knew my mother and father,” he said, trying not to sound like he was fishing for something. “I don’t think he liked my father much, but he seemed to like my mother. Do you know why?”

Hagrid once again seemed to avoid Harry’s eyes as he answered, “Your mum and dad were great people, some of the best I ever knew. Your mum had a way about her that just made people like her. She never judged anyone based on what other people might think of them. When she was here, she had a group of friends from all the different houses. Professor Snape was a member of that group for a long time, but after she started seeing your dad, well, they went their own ways.”

Harry was about to ask more questions, but Hagrid suddenly stood up looked out the window. “Look at the time. You boys had best be getting back up to the school before it gets too dark.”

The large man hustled them out of his hut, pockets full of raisin cakes that the boys had been too kind to decline. Harry resisted the urge to try and make Hagrid tell him more, deciding it was better to take his time. That did not stop him from telling Ron and Neville all about seeing Quirrell at Gringotts the day of the break in as they walked back up to the castle. It also did not stop him from thinking that there were many things that people did not seem to want to tell him.

When they reached their dormitory, all three boys went their separate ways since they still had time before the evening meal. Harry took the opportunity to write letters to Sirius and Ginny telling them all about the day. Sirius' letter was slightly longer since he added several questions about his parents and about the break in at Gringotts. Maybe Professor Snape and Hagrid did not want to answer his questions, but he knew that Sirius would tell him everything if he asked the right questions.

Dear Readers,

Welcome once again to a much-delayed new chapter. In my defense, I have been doing a great deal of research for a new project I am working on. I have also been working on fleshing out the next three stories in this series. Although much of this story holds close to canon, from this point on we will start branching off more. The small ripples are growing larger and the ripples are becoming waves. I can already tell you that by the third story in this series, things are going to be VERY interesting.

On a side note... I've been doing a great deal of reading in the recent weeks. Most of that reading has involved AU's centering on Harry ending up with someone other than Ginny. Now I knew from the first time I ever read Sorcerer's Stone that Harry and Ginny would end up together. Not that I don't appreciate the views of others when it comes to "ships", but if you have to jump through hoops and completely rewrite canon to make a relationship work then it was never meant to be. Sorry. (That doesn't mean I didn't enjoy reading them, as you can see from looking at my favorites.)

Now off you go to read, and me to finishing chapter 12. Once again, I want to thank my lovely and talented betas, C & M, for making me sound much more intelligent than I really am.

Enjoy,

Chris

## Chapter 9: The Midnight Escape

As Harry sat eating breakfast a few days later, he listened to his friends talking around him. Just the day before they had discovered that flying lessons were to start that afternoon. Harry felt like he was going to shout for joy until he read further and saw that they were to be learning with the Slytherin students. Harry had no worries about flying in front of the snobbish Slytherin students, but he could tell right away that Neville did. The slightly chubby boy had seemed to soak up the stories that others were telling about their flying experiences. Ron even took the opportunity to tell Neville all about his favorite Quidditch

team, and how they were in his opinion some of the greatest flyers around.

Everyone seemed to have stories to tell about their wild escapes from Muggles, or their daring feats of aerobatics. Only Harry remained silent about his ability to fly. As far as he was concerned, far too many people watched him as he moved around the school. If they should discover that he was a talented flyer, he would never hear the end of it. With that in mind, Harry planned on only doing what was required in the class and no more. Maybe next year he would try out for the Quidditch team once he was allowed to have a broom at school, but Harry would not draw any attention to himself until then. As these thoughts passed through his mind, Harry heard the arrival of the morning's owl post.

Hedwig landed on his shoulder and dropped his daily letter from Ginny into his hands. "Thank you, Hedwig."

The snowy white owl affectionately butted his head with hers before taking off for the Owlery to get a good day's sleep. Harry was just about to open his letter when he noticed that a rather stern-looking grey owl had just dropped a small package and note in front of Neville. The look on Neville's face told Harry that the young boy was not excited to see it. Since their arrival at school, Neville had received several letters from his grandmother, most of which seemed to upset the boy more than anything else.

"She treats me like I'm dim, or something," Neville had told Harry one night.

Harry wondered if the woman was aware of the changes in her grandson since his arrival at school. At first, Harry had thought Neville was extremely forgetful until he realized Neville was so busy trying not to be noticed that he often did not hear what people were saying to him. Neville's apparent clumsiness was much the same, he was often too busy trying to hide to pay attention to his surroundings. That had all changed after a few days at school. Although he was still shy sometimes, Harry had noticed that Neville had stopped trying to hide from people. Harry suspected that much of that had to do with being away at school, but some of it had to be Neville's growing confidence.

“Would you look at this,” sighed Neville. “She’s sent me a Remembrall. Says in her letter that it’s because of my memory being so bad. I’d chuck it in the bin, but she would just think I forgot where I put it.”

“How’s it work?” asked Harry as he leaned forward to get a better look at the strange glass globe with swirling white smoke inside.

“Well,” Neville said with a wry grin, “you squeeze it in your hand and if you have forgotten something, the smoke turns red.”

Harry watched as Neville squeezed the globe tightly in his hand. The smoke remained pearly white, though. Shaking his head, Neville sat the Remembrall down on the table where it was immediately snatched up by someone reaching over Harry’s shoulder. Both boys turned around instantly to find Draco Malfoy holding Neville’s present in his hand, his goons Crabbe and Goyle standing on either side of him.

“Look at this,” sneered Malfoy. “Longbottom’s grandmother sent him a Remembrall. She must know how thick you really are, Longbottom.”

“Give it back, Malfoy,” Harry said, instantly springing to his feet.

“Oh? Going to make me, Potter?” Malfoy said, his face twisted with malice.

“What have you got there, Draco?”

Harry turned to see Professor Snape walking towards them. Draco looked rather smug at Snape’s approach. What Malfoy did not see, but Harry did, was that Professor McGonagall was also watching them closely from her seat at the teacher’s table.

“Longbottom’s grandmother sent him a present,” Malfoy said, holding the glass globe out for Snape to see. “I was just admiring it and telling Longbottom how much she must think of him.”



Snape looked around between the boys standing in front of him. "Give the boy back his trinket, Draco. Obviously the boy's grandmother knows that he needs help remembering to turn his assignments in on time."

Harry felt as if he had just been betrayed by the Potions teacher. He had just started to think that Snape was not as bad as people said he was when the Professor did this. There was a rising sense of outrage in Harry's mind, and from the look of it, Neville felt the same way. Malfoy handed the Remembrall back to Neville with an evil glint in his eyes. Neville shoved the globe into one of his pockets, and looked as if he was about to stalk off when Snape stopped him.

"That reminds me," Snape hissed. "I need to see you, Potter, and Mr. Longbottom in my office about your abysmal potions essays."

Malfoy and his cronies were laughing as they watched Harry and Neville following after the Potions teacher. They followed the black robed figure of Snape all the way to his dark and dank office in the dungeon. Neville looked crushed that he had been so unfairly treated, and Harry felt much the same. He was also confused because his last potions essay had actually been marked as "Exceeds Expectations."

"Sit down, gentlemen," Snape said as he walked behind his desk and took a seat.

Harry felt like rebelling but something was going on that he did not understand. With a nod of his head to Neville, Harry sat at the table closest to Snape's desk and waited. Snape waved his wand at the door to his office and it closed with an odd squelching sound. Then he turned to look at both boys and shook his head.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom, I am the head of Slytherin House," he said softly. "As such, I must keep my students happy, and under close watch. As such, it has come to my attention that Draco Malfoy has taken a dislike to you, and your friends, Mr. Potter. I can only do so much for you. I cannot have my students thinking that I am taking

sides against them or it will cause even more problems. Do you understand me?"

Suddenly it all made sense to Harry. Snape had only said what he had to in order to appease Malfoy, while getting the boy to return Neville's present from his grandmother. If Snape had not explained himself, Harry would have never understood. Neville looked as if he was still not convinced.

"Why though, Professor?" asked Neville, looking thoroughly confused.

Snape looked as if he was about to say something, but then he stopped and looked at Harry before turning back to answer Neville's question. "My reasons are my own, Mr. Longbottom. You are dismissed."

With another wave of his wand at the door, Snape showed them out of the room. Neville was the first to leave but Harry paused for just a moment as he reached the door. Turning once again to face Snape, Harry smiled at the mysterious Potions Master.

"Thank you, Professor," he whispered before closing the door behind him.

If Harry was surprised by Snape's words, the tabby cat hiding in the corner of the Potions room was even more surprised. Sliding out of the door before Harry closed it all the way; the cat streaked down the dim corridor and vanished into an empty classroom. A moment passed before Professor McGonagall stepped out into the hallway and looked both ways to make sure she was unnoticed. As soon as she was sure the way was clear, the Professor made her way up to her office to think over what she had just seen.

"I don't understand," she thought to herself. "Severus normally despises the Gryffindor students, but he actually seems to like Harry, and by association Harry's friends."

Lost deeply in her thoughts, Minerva McGonagall reached her office and closed the door behind her. She wondered if it was the fact that Severus was acting so unusual that bothered her, or the fact that he was treating Harry as if he actually liked the boy. Given Severus' past history with James Potter, and of course with Lily Potter, it was hard to imagine the Potions teacher's reaction. Still, Severus had been good friends with Lily before she started dating James Potter.

"Could he be trying to make up for how he treated her afterwards?" wondered the Transfiguration teacher.

Sitting down at her desk, Professor McGonagall looked out her window and was lost in her thoughts. Harry for his part was also lost in his thoughts for the rest of the morning. Several hours later, as he gathered with the other Gryffindor first year students for their first flying lesson, he still wondered about the events of that morning, but now he had other things on his mind. He had already decided that he would hide his flying skills as best as he could. Harry was not ashamed of his skill with a broom, he just did not want to have to deal with the added attention he would receive if he started showing off. Besides, Neville and the others looked nervous enough without him acting the fool the first time they were on a broom.

The Slytherin students all strutted out onto the field in a large group. Many of them were loudly proclaiming their prowess with a broom, although Harry noted that several of them looked pale and shaky. They were not the only ones though. Many of the Gryffindor first years looked just as nervous. Harry was surprised to see that Neville and Hermione Granger were among the more nervous looking of the students. Harry and Ron had been trying to reassure Neville that flying was not that bad, but the nervous looking young man seemed to have forgotten everything that had been said to him. The sweat covering his face was a sure sign that Neville was about ready to completely lose it.

Hermione Granger did not look as nervous, but Harry listened to her mumbling to herself about things she had read about flying. Harry covered his face, pretending to yawn, in order to hide the fact that he almost laughed at the bushy haired girl's compulsive need to find safety inside of books. He could not fault her for her desire to learn

new things, but Harry wondered how hard Hermione would fall when books finally failed her. Hopefully she would have friends around her when that time came; otherwise he was afraid that she might not ever be able to get to her feet again.

As those thoughts played through Harry's mind, Madame Hooch came striding across the field towards them. Her eyes instantly drew Harry's attention. Whether it was the startling yellow of her irises, or the fact that she seemed to look at each of them like a bird of prey, Harry felt that this was not a woman to fool around with.

"Good afternoon," Madame Hooch said to the crowd of students. "I am here to teach you how to fly. I do not tolerate any foolishness in my lessons. If I catch any of you fooling around, I will see to it that you are expelled from Hogwarts for endangering your lives, and the lives of other students. Do I make myself clear?"

"YES, MADAME HOOCH!" answered every student in the class in one strong voice.

"Good," continued the flying instructor calmly. "Now everyone stand next to one of the brooms I have laid out in front of you."

Harry looked down at the ground and noticed for the first time several rows of school brooms that were arranged in front of Madame Hooch. Glancing around, he watched the other students take their positions next to the school brooms, many of them looking a bit green as they looked down at the broom. Harry, along with Neville and Ron, moved to a set of brooms furthest from Madame Hooch with Hermione Granger taking the next one in line from them. Harry wondered why Hermione had chosen to stand so close to him and his friends, but he did not get a chance to ask her before Madame Hooch began speaking again.

"I want each of you to hold your hands over your brooms and, in a clear and firm voice, command them up into your hands," she said as she walked back and forth in front of the gathered students.

Each of the students did as instructed by Madame Hooch. Most of their brooms rose quickly into the outstretched hands of the students, Harry and Ron's brooms among them. However, there were several students whose brooms did not so much as twitch as the students beside them repeatedly pleaded with the seemingly inanimate objects to move. Neville's broom rose up about a foot from the ground before falling back to the ground. Hermione's broom did not even twitch although the bushy haired girl tried repeatedly in a pleading voice.

"You have to really mean it, Neville," Harry said in a voice that was just loud enough to carry to Hermione. "If you are nervous, or afraid, it won't work."

Neville looked into Harry's eyes for a moment before nodding and closing his eyes. A moment later he commanded the broom at his feet to rise, which it did with surprising speed. On the other side of Neville, Hermione Granger watched all of this before she also commanded her broom up into her hand. This time her broom rose slowly, but it did eventually come to rest in her hand. Both of them, Neville and Hermione, turned and smiled gratefully at Harry.

"Excellent work, Mr. Potter," whispered Madame Hooch as she walked past him. "I think that deserves 10 points for Gryffindor."

Harry smiled shyly as he watched the rest of the students finally accomplish Madame Hooch's instructions.

"Well done," said the instructor as she marched back to stand in front of them once again. "Now we will mount our brooms. There are two ways to mount a broom. There is the traditional method of holding the broom between your legs, and then there is the side-saddle method used by women when they are wearing skirts or dresses."

After several minutes of showing the proper method of mounting a broom, with Madame Hooch spending extra time with the girls, they were finally ready to take off. At least Harry hoped they were. The whole process of learning to fly seemed much more complicated

when learning this way compared to Sirius just sitting him on an old broom and letting him go. This way was actually rather boring.

“Alright,” continued Madame Hooch finally. “When I blow my whistle, you will all kick off hard and rise a few feet in the air. You will then return to the ground. I will then advise you of what you did right or wrong. Now, everyone get ready.”

Neville, it seemed, was more nervous than Harry had thought. Before Madame Hooch’s whistle even reached her lips, he had shot up into the sky like a cork from a bottle. In the blink of an eye Neville was twenty feet in the air with Madame Hooch calling for him to come back down. Everyone was watching as Neville tried to get control of his broom, but only Harry and Madame Hooch realized something was wrong. The broom was not responding to anything he did, and with every second he was getting higher and higher.

“Stupid fool!” Malfoy yelled. “Can’t even fly a broom.”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” snarled Ron, but his face was pale as he watched Neville rising in the air.

Madame Hooch was casting cushioning charms under Neville but his broom was moving around so much that she could not keep up with him. Then she tried summoning the broom to her, but it seemed that the broom had a mind of its own. People were finally realizing that something was horribly wrong. Students were screaming and Madame Hooch was trying to grab a broom from one of the shocked students, but Harry was already in the air. Hugging the handle of his broom tightly to his chest, Harry kicked off as hard as he could and screamed through the air in an attempt to reach Neville. Neville’s broom was still climbing higher and higher into the sky, now well over one hundred and fifty feet in the air, and climbing faster by the moment.

Time seemed to slow down for Harry as he rocketed through the sky, faster than the old school broom had ever gone before. No matter what Neville’s broom did, Harry stayed right under his terrified friend. Never taking his eyes off Neville, Harry tightened his grip on his

broom with his legs, and reached out with both hands to try and grab Neville. Harry almost had him when the malfunctioning broom suddenly bucked Neville off before spinning wildly in the air, hitting Neville in the head with a sound that turned Harry's blood to ice. Harry thought his heart had stopped as he watched Neville tumble lifelessly towards the ground three hundred feet below them in slow motion. With only a heartbeat to think, Harry pushed over into a steep dive to try to catch the unconscious boy in time before he hit the ground.

Only one thought was clear in Harry's mind as he shot towards the ground, and his friend. "I will not let him be hurt!"

With one last desperate burst of speed, Harry caught Neville around the waist with one arm before pulling up sharply with the other arm. The combined weight of the two boys, not to mention the speed they were moving at, almost snapped the old broom in half. Somehow, Harry held it together long enough for them to slide across the lawn, digging two long gouges into the earth with Harry's trainers. Finally they stopped, running into one of Madame Hooch's cushioning charms right before crashing into the crowd of still screaming students. In a flash, Madame Hooch was at Harry's side.

"Are you alright, Potter?" she asked as she looked him over.

"I'm fine," Harry said as he shakily stood up. "It's Neville that's in a bad way. That broom hit him in the head pretty hard."

He was about to say more when he saw three figures running towards them. He instantly recognized two of the figures, but the other was a stranger to him. Harry guessed she was a nurse by her old-fashioned uniform. Pushing him aside, the woman examined Neville closely for a few minutes. Harry could see blood pouring down Neville's face from a very nasty gash, and he feared what that might mean. He was about to ask when the nurse waved her wand over Neville's head. In an instant Neville's wound sealed itself.

"How is the boy, Poppy?" asked Dumbledore, his concern clearly visible on his face.

“He’ll be fine, Professor,” said the nurse. “He’ll need a blood replenishing potion, and a night’s stay in the hospital ward, but other than that he’s fine.”

“I’m sorry, Albus,” Madame Hooch said in a hushed tone. “I should have brought my broom out with me.”

“My dear Madame Hooch,” smiled the ancient wizard, “we cannot foresee everything.”

“Potter,” Professor McGonagall said, her face looking pale and worried, “are you alright?”

“That was a very brave thing you did, Harry,” said Professor Dumbledore. “Thanks to your quick thinking, Mr. Longbottom was saved from possibly severe injury. I think that deserves at least fifty points for Gryffindor, don’t you?”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said in surprise.

“Come with me, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said to Harry as Dumbledore turned back to Madame Hooch and the school nurse.

Without another word, Professor McGonagall led Harry back into the castle. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Harry watched as Dumbledore levitated Neville into the air and followed Poppy back into the school. Harry walked slowly behind McGonagall, looking at her back as she walked silently down the corridors of the school. He was unsure what she wanted with him, but Harry hoped it was not to lecture him the way that Sirius sometimes did when Harry performed accidental magic. Still, the longer he followed the stern Professor, the darker his thoughts turned. When she finally stopped outside of one of the classrooms and stuck her head inside, Harry felt cold dread creeping down his back.

“Excuse me, Professor Flitwick,” she said to the tiny Charms teacher. “Could I possibly borrow Wood for a little while?”



“Of course,” squeaked the excited Charms teacher.

Harry was trembling when he heard this, terrified that he was about to be beaten for violating a school rule. So it was with more than a little relief that Harry realized Wood was not a stick or a cane, but a slightly confused looking older boy from Gryffindor House. The two boys looked at each other, Wood silently asking Harry what was going on, to which Harry could only shrug his shoulders. They continued to walk in silence for a few moments more until Professor McGonagall finally opened the door to an empty classroom and ushered both boys inside. Harry immediately saw Peeves the Poltergeist writing rude words on the blackboard, but the small man stopped when he saw Harry.

“Out, Peeves,” commanded Professor McGonagall.

After the poltergeist had chucked all his chalk loudly in a bin, Harry finally found himself alone with the Professor and Wood. He hoped that now he would finally understand what was going on. The stern Transfiguration teacher had her back to the two boys, and Harry was afraid she was getting ready to start yelling at any moment. The only thing that confused him was why the other boy, Wood, was there. A moment later when Professor McGonagall turned around with a wide smile on her face, Harry really began to worry.

“Mr. Potter, this is Oliver Wood, the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Wood,” said the beaming Professor. “I’ve found us a Seeker.”

“Really?” Wood said, looking back and forth between the Professor and Harry with a look of disbelief.

“Was that your first time on a broom, Mr. Potter?” asked the smiling woman.

“No, ma’am,” Harry replied honestly. “My uncle’s taught me how to fly and play Quidditch.”

“Even better,” smiled McGonagall.

Several hours later found Harry sitting rather dazed in the Great Hall waiting for his friends to arrive for the evening meal. Professor McGonagall had taken Harry and Wood out to the Quidditch pitch to test Harry's flying skills, and she could not have been happier with what she had seen. Wood had brought a bucket of Muggle golf balls out with him and spent almost an hour throwing them as hard as he could in different directions. Harry had sped after each of the balls and caught each and every one to the delight of his Head of House.

"I'll be contacting your uncle about getting you a broom," she told him as they walked back towards the castle.

"I got one for Christmas this year," Harry said, not believing what he was hearing.

"Oh really?" she said with a smile.

"What did you get, Potter?" asked Wood.

"It's a Nimbus 2000," had been Harry's answer, and Wood could not have been happier.

Now here he sat, waiting to tell Ron and Neville the news. Wood had wanted to keep it all a big secret until their first game, but Harry was not about to hide this from his friends. When he finally saw Ron walking in, thoughts of Quidditch were pushed from his mind as he wondered where Neville was. He barely waited for Ron to sit down before he asked what was going on.

"Neville's fine, mate," Ron said with a smile. "Madame Pomfrey had him fixed up in no time. Course, she wanted him to stay the night to make sure he was alright. I snuck in for a bit before she caught me, and he looked like he was wearing Quirrell's turban."

"But he's okay, right?" Harry asked still feeling afraid for his friend.

"He's just fine," Hermione Granger said from the other side of the table.

Harry had not noticed her sitting down across from them. Normally she sat further away from Harry and his friends, but for some reason tonight she had chosen the seat that Neville usually took.

“I suppose you got in trouble for disobeying Madame Hooch’s instructions and flying off,” she said in a superior tone of voice. “You might have gotten yourself badly injured with that foolish attempt to save Neville.”

“How would you know?” snapped Ron. “You had your eyes closed and your hands over your ears the entire time. You didn’t see the way that Harry saved Neville from getting hurt.”

“Let it go, Ron,” Harry said in a whisper, but Ron ignored him.

“Did you even hear Dumbledore tell Harry that he saved Neville from getting really hurt, or the fact that they gave Harry fifty points for being so brave?” continued the now red faced Ron.

“Well,” began Hermione in a shocked whisper, but Ron cut her off.

“If it had been you,” snarled Ron, “you would have let Neville break his neck rather than break one of your precious rules.”

“That’s enough, Ron,” Harry said putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Let her be. Come on, I’ve lost my appetite.”

Ron nodded to Harry, and both boys stood up to leave the table. They were just about to walk out of the Great Hall when Ron’s brothers, Fred and George, stopped the two boys.

“Wood’s just told us,” said one of the twins.

“We’re on the Gryffindor team, too,” said the other.

“Gryffindor team?” Ron said looking at Harry in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

In a hushed voice, Harry quickly filled Ron in on the events that had taken place after the failed flying lesson. "So, she made me the Seeker for the Gryffindor team. I was going to tell you after I made sure Neville was alright, but we got interrupted."

"That's so cool, Harry," Ron said, looking even more excited about the prospect than Harry was. "You've got to be the youngest Seeker in..."

"A century," said a voice from behind them.

Harry turned around to find Hermione standing behind them. He just could not understand why she kept butting in on their conversations. With a jerk of his head, and a rather cold look at the bushy haired witch, Harry led the boys out of the Great Hall and through the Entrance Hall to the stairway. Looking over his shoulder Harry saw Hermione following them, so he quickly ducked into the first boys bathroom that he could find since he knew she would never follow him inside. A quick conversation later, and everyone was now laughing about Harry's good fortune. After Fred and George had left, Harry finally asked Ron about Hermione.

"Why does she keep following us?"

Ron shrugged his shoulders and walked over to one of the sinks to splash some water on his face.

"She's got no friends," Ron said finally. "She's just so bossy that no one wants to talk to her. I think the only person that pays any attention to her at all is Percy, and that's only because he's so bossy as well."

"Well, whatever the reason," Harry said as he leaned against one of the stalls, "I just wish she would quit following me around."

"Got yourself a girlfriend, Potter?" said a cold voice from the doorway. "Is that why Granger is standing outside the door trying to listen in?"

Harry spun around and found himself face to face with Draco Malfoy. The blond haired boy wore his usual sneer of contempt as he stood looking at Harry. Harry wanted nothing more at that moment than to ram his fist right into the sneering boy's face, but Ron was one step ahead of him. Harry acted quickly to get between the two boys, even though he wanted to hit Malfoy just as badly. However, he knew that if he let Ron punch Malfoy it would just cause more problems.

"Sod off, Malfey," snarled Ron.

"My name is Malfoy, you blood traitor," Malfoy screamed back at them.

"You better go now, Malfoy," Harry said as he tried to hold Ron back. "Only reason I'm holding him back right now is because I know he would get a detention for putting you in the hospital wing."

"I'm not afraid of you, or him, Potter," the pale boy sneered as sweat started pouring down his face. "I'll take you on any time, Potter. A Wizard's Duel."

"You're on!" shouted Ron. "When and where?"

"Trophy room at midnight," Malfoy shouted back, as he backed out of the room slowly. "Wands only, Potter."

"We'll be there, Malfey," Ron shouted as Malfoy opened the bathroom door and stepped outside.

As Harry watched the door close behind Malfoy, he turned to look Ron. "What did we just agree to?"

"Wizards duel," Ron said, trying to regain his composure. "Not to worry though, Harry. Malfey likes to talk big but I doubt he knows enough real magic to stuff in a thimble. You'll just end up shooting sparks at each other, but if he tries anything else you can always forget the wands and beat him senseless."

Harry nodded as he thought about it. Part of him really wanted to make Malfoy pay for all the nasty things he had said and done in the short time that Harry had known him. Then again, there was a part of him that was afraid of becoming the very type of person that he hated, a bully. As he looked at Ron, Harry wondered if there was a way out of this duel. That thought weighed heavily on his mind as he and Ron stepped out of the bathroom.

"I heard what you said in there," said a small voice as soon as they stepped out of the bathroom.

Harry turned and saw that Hermione was standing just outside the door. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she had a look of determination on her face as she stood looking at him. His thoughts of a moment before were forgotten as he looked her in the eyes. It was not exactly anger that filled him as he looked at her, it was more a sense that she was interfering in his life.

"You can't fight with Malfoy," the frowning girl said. "You'll get in so much trouble."

"Stay out of this, Hermione," Harry said flatly.

"Malfoy deserves it," Ron snapped at the girl. "You just can't help butting in, can you?"

Harry walked away, not giving the bushy haired girl the chance to say another word. Ron followed after him, looking over his shoulder occasionally to make sure that Hermione was not following them again. Neither boy said anything, perhaps because they felt badly for once again being rude to the lonely girl. Whatever the reason, neither spoke about the duel again until Neville came wandering into the common room later that night.

"What you doing here, mate?" Ron asked. "Thought you were going to be in the hospital wing all night?"

"You alright, Neville?" Harry asked looking closely at their friend.

“I’m fine, Harry, and thanks for the save,” smiled Neville. “I guess some Ravenclaws were practicing potions in their dorm room and they made rather a mess of it. Madame Pomfrey needed the extra bed so she let me go on the condition that I check in with her tomorrow.”

“Nice!” Ron laughed as Neville flopped down in a chair at the table they were sitting at. “You can go with us on a little mission then.”

Ron proceeded to tell Neville all about the midnight duel with Malfoy. Harry had almost hoped Ron had forgotten about it, but it seemed that he was not to get so lucky. It did not help that Neville seemed almost as excited about it as Ron was. The two boys quickly planned out the entire trip to the Trophy Room, and were starting to offer advice on how best to pummel Malfoy when Harry realized how late it was. Looking around, Harry saw that Hermione was sitting across the room watching them. She looked as if she wanted to say something to them, but she also looked sad and lonely.

“Come on,” Harry said loud enough so that everyone nearby could hear him. “Time for bed.”

Neville and Ron nodded and the three of them quickly made their way upstairs. Quickly getting ready for bed, Harry pulled the drapes closed around his bed and sat in the dark and quiet, thinking about what they were about to do. He wanted to shut Malfoy up, but he still kept thinking that he did not want to turn into a bully because of it. Those thoughts never left his mind as he sat there, until finally Ron stuck his head through the curtains.

“Time to go, Harry,” whispered the red haired boy.

Harry nodded and slid out of bed, being as quiet as possible so as not to wake the other two boys in the room. Neville was already down in the common room waiting for them, and Harry knew that there was no backing out now. Silently the three boys made their way towards the portrait hole and out into the corridor beyond. They had just left the corridor leading to Gryffindor Tower when they saw a small figure moving in the shadows.

“I can’t believe you are really going to go through with this, Harry,” said Hermione as she stepped out of the shadows and into the torchlight. “You’ll be in so much trouble if you are caught.”

“Like you really care,” hissed Neville. “It’s all about house points for you, isn’t it? You don’t care what anyone does so long as you’re number one.”

“Knock it off, Neville,” Harry said finally, seeing tears in the young girl’s eyes. “Just go back to the common room, Hermione. If we get caught, we’ll tell them you tried to stop us. Maybe that will earn you a few points.”

Harry had not meant what he said in a bad way, but his words seemed to strike Hermione like a slap to the face. Hermione ran past them towards the Fat Lady’s portrait, and Harry could hear her sobs clearly as she passed him. Although he did not consider himself to be overly close to Hermione Granger, Harry instantly felt bad and turned to run after her. A sense that he must protect her, even if it was from himself and his friends, filled Harry’s chest as he caught up to the crying girl just in front of the now empty portrait.

“I can’t even get inside now,” bawled Hermione. “The Fat Lady has gone off somewhere.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” Harry said, placing a hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Is that all you really think I care about, Harry?” she said looking into his eyes, tears streaming down her face. “You and your friends just think I care about stupid house points?”

Harry could hear shuffling feet behind him, and he knew that Ron and Neville were feeling just as guilty as he was for the way they had been treating Hermione. Suddenly, Harry realized that he had been treating Hermione in much the same way that the bullies from his old school had treated him. By ignoring her, and not trying to get to know her, Harry had become the thing he hated the most. Not knowing



what else to do, Harry did what Sirius always did when he was feeling bad, and hugged the crying girl. If Hermione was shocked by Harry's sudden comforting gesture, Ron and Neville were floored.

"No," Harry said releasing the stunned girl. "I don't think you just care about the points. I just wish you wouldn't be so bossy all the time."

"I don't mean to be bossy," Hermione said pulling away and looking down at her feet.

Harry was about to say something more when they all heard a strange snuffling sound coming from the other end of the corridor. They all turned just in time to see Mrs. Norris disappearing around the corner. Harry knew that Filch the caretaker would be there in moments, and he would not care what their excuse was for being out in the corridors after curfew. That only left one option that Harry could see.

"Run," Harry hissed at his friends. "We've got to hide."

Harry grabbed Hermione by the hand and dragged the startled girl after him, Ron and Neville following close behind. All of the time Harry and his friends had spent trying to find their way around the castle was paying off now. Harry led them through several corridors and down several flights of stairs until he finally saw what he was looking for: a single door that looked as if it had not been used in quite some time. Harry tried the door but it was locked.

"Move," Hermione said pulling out her wand and pointing it at the door's lock. "Alohomora!"

There was a click from the door, and suddenly it swung open. Harry quickly ushered his friends through the door before pulling it closed behind him. Harry pressed his ear to the door trying to hear any sounds that might be Filch following them. It was hard to hear anything because of the sound of his three companions' heavy breathing, and what sounded like a music box playing somewhere in the distance. He was just about to tell them to be quiet when he

heard someone walking past the door. Harry held his breath trying to hear better, but his heart was pounding so hard that he could barely hear anything from the other side of the door. In fact, the longer he stood there, the louder the sound of his friends' breathing became. Now, someone was tugging on the sleeve of his robe, but Harry ignored them until he was positive that whoever it was that had been walking by was gone.

"What is it?" Harry whispered as he turned to look at his friends.

Out of all the things that Harry had seen since he arrived at Hogwarts, the sight that met his eyes this time was enough to leave him speechless. Not only were his friends so pale that they almost seemed to be glowing in the dim light of the room, but Harry doubted they had breathed even once since they had entered the room. Instead, the sound of breathing that he had been hearing was coming from an immense three-headed dog that was sound asleep behind them. So far, they had not managed to wake the dog up, and Harry did not want to be there when it did. As quietly as possible, Harry pulled the door open and ushered his friends outside.

No one said a word as they all ran back to Gryffindor Tower. Thankfully, the Fat Lady had returned to her portrait and after several stern words from her, Harry and the others finally collapsed on the floor of the common room. Only Hermione sat somewhere else, sitting heavily on one of the large couches in the room. All of them were breathing heavily as they tried to calm their beating hearts.

"What in the world are they doing with a beast like that in a school?" Ron panted.

"Obviously it was guarding something," Hermione said after catching her breath.

Neville looked up at her, obviously confused. "Guarding what?"

"Honestly," sighed the young girl as she got up and walked towards the stairs to her room. "Didn't you see the trapdoor he was laying on?"

“Missed that bit, Hermione,” Harry chuckled. “I was concentrating on the three heads.”

“Well, yes, they were quite startling,” replied Hermione, but her face had paled at the memory. “As it is though, I’ve had more than enough adventures tonight. I think I’ll turn in now.”

Without another word, the bushy haired witch left the three boys staring after her. Harry finally broke out laughing as he got up and made his way up to their room, Ron and Neville following close behind him. They each crawled into their beds, but Harry was wide-awake now after the excitement of the evening. Reaching over to his nightstand, Harry grabbed a roll of parchment and his favorite Muggle pen. Within moments, Harry was writing a letter telling Ginny all about their adventure that night. He continued to write late into the night before finally drifting off to sleep with the freshly finished letter tightly rolled up in his hand, and a wide smile on his face.

A/N:

Ohai-yo,

Yep, I'm back. Contrary to rumors, I did not join the circus or run off with a pair of sexy cheerleaders, although, I am currently taking applications if any cheerleaders are interested in applying for the position. What I really did was take some time off to catch up on my reading. I have a stack of books sitting on my desk that I have been collecting over the past few months that were just begging me to read them, so I did. Add to that a slight bit of family drama and you have my reasons for not updating in so long. Sorry.

Another reason this is so late is because I have been writing out the new chapters by hand. I spend so much time on the computer thanks to work that I find using pen and paper to write the new chapters to be very soothing. As it stands right now, finished writing chapter 13, and almost done with 14, so as soon as I get them typed up I'll have them shipped off to my wonderful betas.

Enough of my chatter though...

Scoot...

Go read... and please review. :)

Chris

## Chapter 10: All Hallows Eve

Over the next week, Harry and his friends started thinking of their run-in with the gigantic three-headed dog as a great adventure. Harry wanted to ask Hermione what she thought of it, but even though she always seemed to be nearby, she never spoke to any of them after that night. As far as Harry could tell, she was trying to keep her distance, while staying close by. Whether it was a desire to be a part of their group, or just her need to keep an eye on him, Harry could not tell. After their little adventure though, Harry did not mind her being around so much.

This morning found Harry and the others sitting in the Great Hall eating breakfast. Between mouthfuls of food, Ron was busy telling anyone that would listen about his brother Charlie's job working with dragons in Romania. Harry had heard all about Charlie from Ginny's letters. However, Ron tended to add details that only a young boy would appreciate, like the types of injuries and such that Charlie had suffered in the course of his job. Ginny had always made Charlie's job sound dangerous, but Ron made it sound exciting.

Harry was so caught up in Ron's tales that he did not even see Hedwig swooping down towards him with a rather large package. It was only at the last moment, just as Hedwig let go of the long and slender package that Harry saw her and quickly grabbed the bundle. The rather exhausted owl landed on Harry's shoulder, affectionately nibbling on his ear until he handed her a large slice of bacon.

"Thanks, Hedwig," Harry said fondly to the snow-white owl.

Hedwig hooted a fond farewell and then took to the air again to return to the school owls for a well-deserved day's sleep. Meanwhile, Harry was just getting ready to rip open the package in front of him when he noticed a small letter attached to it. Deciding to see what the letter said, Harry quickly tore it open and read it.

Harry,

Professor McGonagall contacted me last night and told me that you had been made Seeker for the Gryffindor house team. I'm so proud of you, and I know that your father would be as well since he loved the game almost as much as he loved your mother. Remus just got back from his monthly trip and he says he's proud of you as well, although he reminds you not to forget your studies just because you are on the Quidditch team now. Bah! I say have fun, you only get to be young once.

Anyway, as you have probably guessed by now, the package in front of you contains your Nimbus 2000. I recommend you open it in your room since according to McGonagall, your being on the team is still something of a secret.

Send me the schedule for your games and I'll make sure to be there with Remus.

We can't wait to see you.

Love,

Sirius

Harry laughed as he read the letter in front of him. Ron and Neville looked at him to see what was so funny, so he handed the letter to Neville to read. Within moments, both boys were grinning from ear to ear as they shoveled food into their mouths so they could all hurry back up to the dormitory. Harry was no longer hungry. He was just too excited by the thought that he would finally get to use his new broom. Within minutes the three boys were running towards the stairs and the Gryffindor dormitory.

"You'll be expelled for that, Potter," said a sneering voice as they reached the staircase.

Harry spun around and saw Draco Malfoy standing just behind them. "You really think so, Malfoy?"

"First years aren't allowed to have brooms," said the confident young Slytherin. "You'll be out of here faster than you can say, 'Muggle-lover.'"

"What's this then?" asked the high pitched voice of Professor Flitwick as he walked towards them.

"Potter's been sent a broom, Professor," Malfoy said with a nasty gleam in his eyes.

"Oh yes," Flitwick said with a smile. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances. What type of broom did you get, Mr. Potter?"

Harry watched as Malfoy's jaw dropped upon hearing Flitwick's words. "It's a Nimbus 2000, I got it for my birthday this summer, Professor."

"Excellent, Mr. Potter," Flitwick said with another smile. "I can't wait to see what you can do with it."

Harry and the others smiled back at the Professor before making their way up the stairs. Malfoy just stared up after them, his confusion and rage mixing on his face in a comical mask. All three boys were laughing about it by the time they reached the Fat Lady's portrait. They had just stepped into the common room when Hermione stepped in front of them.

"Is that your reward for being a hero?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not a hero, Hermione," Harry answered, his cheeks turning red. "I just did what needed to be done to help a friend."

"You're wrong, Harry," the bushy haired witch said with a sad smile. "You are a hero, even if you don't think so. I wish I were as brave as you are."

"Why to do you even care what we do?" Neville asked suddenly.

Hermione looked at Harry for a moment before she answered. "I really don't know."

Harry was about to say something about how he was just a normal boy, and that she was really much braver than she thought, but Hermione gave him another sad smile and walked away. He had to wonder how she could think he was brave. Hadn't the bullies back home always pushed him around? Of course, he had never had people watching his back before, so maybe that had something to do with it. Still, it made him wonder why he had never stood up to the bullies back home. They were nowhere as dangerous as the Slytherins, but he had always backed down when they started pushing him around.

“I think I’m just more confident here,” Harry thought as he started up to the stairs to his dorm room.

Harry badly wanted to take his broom out to the Quidditch pitch but classes prevented it. Instead, he spent most of the day daydreaming about that night when he would be meeting Oliver Wood out on the pitch for his first real training session with the Gryffindor team. His classes seemed even longer that day as he tried to force himself to pay attention to his professors, but he could feel the pull of the broomstick. It was with a great deal of excitement, when classes were finally over for the day, that Harry realized he was finally free. Harry and his friends sprinted up to the Gryffindor tower to grab his broom before they ran down and out of the castle on their way to the pitch.

“Can we still have a go on your broom?” panted Ron as they arrived at the pitch.

“Of course you can,” smiled Harry as he ripped the wrappings off his Nimbus 2000.

“I’ll let you fly, Ron,” Neville laughed. “I think I’ll keep my feet on the ground for now.”

For the next hour, the two boys took turns flying around the pitch as Neville timed them. The idea was to see who was the fastest on the broom, and so far the clear winner was Harry. Ron did not really care who was faster, he just loved flying and weaving in and out of the stands. Harry amazed both of his friends as he demonstrated several high speed dives that his uncles had taught him, although they had taught him on a much slower broom than the Nimbus.

“This must be what it feels like to be a bird,” thought Harry as he streaked towards the ground, pulling up only a foot from the ground.

“That’s bloody brilliant!” shouted Oliver Wood, who was standing next to Ron and Neville now.

For the next two hours, Harry and the Gryffindor Quidditch team went through training drills designed by Wood. Ron and Neville watched



from the sidelines as Harry demonstrated his speed and agility to his other teammates. No matter where Wood released the Snitch, Harry caught it in a matter of moments. At one point he even whipped his broom around and knocked the Quaffle through the center goal before zooming to the other end of the pitch to catch the Snitch in his outstretched hand.

“That was incredible, Harry!” Fred and George said together as the team finally landed at the end of practice.

“With your skills,” Wood said with a wide grin, “the Quidditch Cup is as good as ours this year.”

The rest of the team agreed, causing Harry to blush furiously until they all left, leaving him alone on the pitch with Ron and Neville. Harry let Ron have another go on his broomstick while he and Neville sat in the stands and watched Ron practicing some Keeper drills. Ron looked like a natural Keeper to Harry, and Neville agreed with him when Harry mentioned it. A half an hour later, it was getting dark and the boys decided to return to the castle. They had missed the evening meal, but no one really cared after such an exciting afternoon.

“Next summer you’ll have to come ‘round my place so we can go flying,” Harry told the two boys.

“And when we aren’t at your place,” Ron said with a wide grin, “you can both come over to mine.”

“Brilliant!” smiled Neville. “I’d invite you to my place, but Gran doesn’t approve too much of flying.”

They were about halfway to the castle when Harry saw someone standing in the shadows of the castle. When they got closer, he recognized the figure and told the other boys he would meet them in the common room in a little while. Walking over to the tall man, Harry grinned at his old friend.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Knight?” Harry said, shaking the older man’s hand.

“Just thought I would watch you fly for a bit and see how you are doing,” said the older man as they walked down towards the lake to talk.

Harry told his old friend all about his adventures since he arrived at the school. Mr. Knight seemed most interested in everything Harry had to say. The older man often laughed, but it was a kind and gentle laugh unlike the ones that most adults had used around Harry when he was growing up. That was one of the things that Harry liked most about Mr. Knight, he reminded Harry of the way that his uncles, Sirius and Remus, treated him. There was no condescension in the way that Mr. Knight treated him, and Harry trusted him even more for it.

“We need to get you back up to the castle now, Harry,” Mr. Knight said looking at the almost black sky around them. “Your friends are probably wondering where you got off to.”

The two of them walked back to the castle, and when they reached the doors Harry shook his friend’s large callused hand before heading inside. He made his way up to the Gryffindor common room. A few students still lingered in the room, but he ignored them and headed to his dorm. Ron and Neville were waiting for him when he arrived, and Harry told them all about his visit with Mr. Knight before crawling into bed and writing a letter to Ginny to tell her the same.

It was a few days later that Harry woke up and realized that it was the thirty-first of October. He had been at school for two months, and time had seemed to fly by for him. When he had first learned of Hogwarts, Harry had been more than a little nervous about living away from his family. Now that he had been here for two months, Harry realized that he had loved every moment of it. Sure, he could have done without Malfoy, and all the attention he got because of who he was, but it was still a lot of fun to be here.

Harry just enjoyed the day, making his way to Charms class with his two friends. Today they were going to be working on the Wingardium Leviosa charm. Harry and Neville would be working together, but Ron had gotten stuck with Hermione Granger. Ron was not happy about

the seating arrangement, and the fact that he barely paid any attention to Professor Flitwick was only one of the signs of his feelings. When they reached the practical exercise for the day, Harry and Neville took turns trying to make their feather levitate. So far they had only managed to make it scurry around their desk, but that was far better than Ron's performance so far.

"You're saying it wrong, Ron," Hermione was telling the scowling redhead.

Neville was doing his best to stifle a laugh as Hermione started lecturing Ron on his pronunciation of the spell. Ron was getting angry now, his ears almost as red as his hair. Harry knew his friend was about to explode, so it was not all that surprising when the large white feather that Ron had been trying to levitate suddenly burst into flames. The tiny Professor ran over and put the flames out, but not before Ron had turned to his partner.

"If you're so bloody smart," he snarled to the startled young witch, "you do it then. Come on, let's see you make the spell work."

Hermione looked as if Ron had slapped her in the face, but once Flitwick had replaced Ron's feather, she suddenly looked extremely determined. Within moments, the snowy white feather in front of her was rising into the air. Ron's jaw dropped as he watched the feather floating in the air.

"Oh, that is just wonderful," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "Everyone, look here. Miss Granger has managed to successfully make her feather levitate. That will be ten points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

Ron's mood went downhill from there. As he stalked out of class with Harry and Neville, Ron was nearly shouting.

"She's such a know-it-all," he was saying. "I mean really. Who cares about some stupid levitation spell? It's not like I'll be required to levitate a feather ever again, now is it?"

“Don’t hold back, Ron,” Neville laughed. “Tell us how you really feel.”

“I will!” shouted Ron. “Granger is really starting to get on my last nerve. She acts like she’s so much better than everyone else, it’s no bloody wonder she’s got no friends.”

Harry turned around to say something to Ron when a bushy haired brown blur ran past him. He knew instantly who it was, and just as quickly he knew that Hermione had heard everything Ron had been saying about her.

“I think she was crying,” whispered Neville, looking uncomfortable.

“Way to go, Ron,” Harry said with a harsh look at Ron. “She heard everything you were saying. Are you proud of yourself?”

Now Ron was the one that looked as if he had been slapped, his face turning a dark crimson color as he tried to say something. Whatever it was that he was trying to say, it came out as nothing more than a few incoherent grunts before he turned and walked away. Harry and Neville watched him go, and for once, neither boy felt the need to follow him. Neither boy really liked Hermione, but they did not dislike her either. Ron’s comments were something they had each thought to themselves at one point or another since they had met the bossy young witch, but Harry thought they had at least gotten to the point where they could treat each other civilly.

“We’re as bad as the bullies back home,” Harry whispered.

“You’re wrong, Harry,” Neville said firmly. “I was always bullied before I got here. That changed when I met you. You watch out for people, and you stand up for what’s right.”

Harry felt his face getting red as Neville spoke. “You make it sound like I’ve never had a bully chasing after me. Neville, where I grew up, not even the adults would stand up for me. In my whole life, I’ve only ever met a handful of adults that treated me like I was worth a damn.”

“Maybe that’s why I doubt you could ever be a bully,” Neville said, turning and walking down the corridor. “You know what it’s like, Harry.”

Those words echoed in Harry’s mind for the rest of the day. Ron and Hermione didn’t show up for afternoon classes, and Harry hoped that his friend had gone to apologize to the crying girl. Unfortunately, that turned out not to be the case. Parvati Patil told Neville that she had seen Hermione in the second floor girls’ bathroom crying in one of the stalls. When he told Harry about it, Harry could only shake his head, wondering where Ron was and why he had not apologized yet. If Ron would just apologize, then Hermione would settle down, and Harry hoped that would put an end to their foolish animosity.

“Where’s Ron?” Neville asked.

“I don’t know,” answered Harry, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I thought he would at least show up for lunch.”

“Should we go looking for him?” asked Neville.

Harry cleaned off his glasses and then slid them back on his face, “No. Let him cool off. Ron evidently has something on his mind that he needs to figure out. If we don’t see him at the feast tonight, we’ll go looking for him.”

Several hours later found Harry and Neville in the Great Hall waiting for the feast to begin. There was still no sign of Hermione or Ron and the two boys had decided they would go looking for them as soon as the feast was over. Harry still could not believe that Ron had missed two meals, for Ron never missed a chance to eat. That, more than anything else, worried Harry. He was just about to suggest to Neville that they skip the feast when the great doors suddenly swung open. The figure of Professor Quirrell stumbled through the door and up the aisle between the tables, towards the Headmaster’s table.

“Troll! Troll in the dungeon!” he shouted, as he reached the middle of the room. “I thought you should know.”

With that, Quirrell collapsed in a heap, and the Hall broke out in chaos. Everywhere Harry looked students were screaming and rushing towards the doors. Having read about trolls, Harry could understand their fear. Still, that was not his first concern. The only thing that was going through Harry's mind was the worry that Ron did not know about the troll.

"Silence!" bellowed Dumbledore from the front of the Hall. "Prefects, lead the students back to your common rooms and stay there until your head of house comes for you!"

Harry had never seen Dumbledore look so serious. The old wizard's eyes looked as if bolts of lightning danced behind his half moon spectacles. It was a sign of how serious the Headmaster was that the room remained silent except for the prefects calling for the students to follow them. It was only the foolishness of Dumbledore's command that the students leave the relative safety of the Great Hall that caused Harry to wonder if the Headmaster was really aware of the danger.

"Harry," whispered Neville as they followed Percy. "We've got to find Ron before he runs into that troll."

"Don't forget, Hermione is probably still in the bathroom crying," Harry whispered back. "Since we know where she is, we'll warn her first. Then maybe she can help us look for Ron."

Neville nodded his agreement to the plan and the two of them slowed down so that the rest of the Gryffindor students passed. Once the two boys were far enough behind the others, they quickly stepped into an unused classroom and waited until the corridor fell silent. Harry was just about to step back out into the hallway when he heard someone running towards them. Harry ducked back into the dark classroom just in time to see Snape running past them on his way to the stairs.

"Where's he going in such a hurry?" asked Neville, looking over Harry's shoulder.

“Maybe Dumbledore sent him to make sure the troll doesn’t try to get past that three headed dog,” answered Harry, his instincts providing the answer he needed.

“Probably,” agreed Neville. “I know I wouldn’t want to cross Snape AND that dog.”

Both boys snorted with laughter, their hands tightly covering their mouths, trying to remain as quiet as possible while they waited for the sounds of Snape running down the corridor to vanish in the distance. Once Harry was sure that the coast was clear, he signaled for Neville to follow him. At a dead run, the two boys headed for the second floor to look for Hermione. Unfortunately, they had no idea where the girls’ bathroom was on the second floor.

“How did a troll get in the school?” panted Neville as they ran up the stairs.

“No idea,” Harry replied, taking two stairs at a time. “I wouldn’t put it past Quirrell to let it in just so he could get some attention.”

“You really need to let this thing you have against Quirrell go,” Neville said, but Harry was too far ahead to hear him.

As soon as the two boys reached the second floor, they ran into an overpowering stench. It was like nothing Harry had ever smelled before. The odor was so powerful that his eyes actually began to water as he and Neville made their way along the corridor. Harry was just starting to wonder if it was caused by one of Fred and George’s pranks when he saw the hulking form of the troll heading into one of the doorways in the corridor.

“We’ve got to lock it in,” he whispered to Neville, pointing at the key that was sticking out of the door’s lock. “As soon as we lock it in, we run and find a teacher. That way everyone is safe.”

“Right,” said Neville, although he looked a bit pale.

As soon as the troll was completely in the room, Harry and Neville darted forward. Harry slammed the door shut and Neville quickly turned the key in the lock before pulling it free. Worried that the great hulking brute might break the door down, the two boys turned and ran back towards the main staircase. They had taken only a half dozen strides when they heard a blood-curdling scream come from the other side of the door they had just locked. Both boys skidded to a stop and looked at each other.

“Bloody hell!” yelled Neville, turning even paler than he had been.

“It’s the girls bathroom!” Harry yelled back, looking Neville in the eye.

Running back to the door, Neville unlocked it as quickly as he could before throwing the door open. Harry rushed inside first, his wand drawn, but the sight of destruction that awaited him wiped his mind clear of any heroic ideas he might have had. The troll was just too large to believe as it shattered a sink with its club. Not even Hagrid was that large. Even worse was the fact that the stench rolling off the creature was overpowering in the confined space of the girls’ bathroom. Harry pushed that all aside though when he saw Hermione huddled in a corner trying to get away from the gigantic monster as it slowly moved towards her.

“Hermione!” bellowed Harry, his mind suddenly filled with an overwhelming desire to save the terrified girl.

A sudden image came to Harry suddenly. It was the memory of his uncle digging postholes for a new fence over the previous summer. The spell had been able to gouge holes in even the hardest ground, and from what Harry had read, a troll’s skin was almost as hard as rock. Pulling his wand, Harry prayed he could actually make the spell work now.

“Defodio!” he screamed, pointing the wand at the troll’s broad back.

Neville for his part was busy throwing chunks of wood and rubble at the beast’s back. He could not believe his eyes when he saw a small hole suddenly appear in the troll’s back. Harry was rather surprised



by the result of his spell. He had hoped it would do more damage, but at least it got the troll's attention. The beast slowly turned to look at the source of the discomfort in its back, only to find Harry and Neville looking rather scared. Harry had wanted to get the monster's attention, but now that he had it, Harry had no idea what to do with it. Then it hit him: it was like a game of Quidditch. All he had to do was distract the beast while Neville went for the goal.

"Get Hermione," Harry hissed at Neville as he raised his wand again. "Defodio!"

This time the small hole was in the center of the troll's chest. It was still too shallow to do any real damage, but it did draw the troll's attention completely to Harry. The troll was moving faster now, anger starting to show in its beady little eyes as Harry continued to fire one spell after another at the beast. All the while, Neville was working his way along the far wall towards the trembling form of Hermione. Harry watched as Neville reached out for her, pulling her from the corner and back along the wall towards the door. They might even have made it to the door if the troll had not suddenly roared at Harry, causing Hermione to shriek in terror so loudly that the troll spun around to see what had made the sound.

"Bloody hell," Neville said in shock, looking up into the troll's eyes as Hermione began screaming again.

Why Harry did what he did next was as much a mystery to him as it was to those that saw him do it. Without any thought for his own safety, Harry climbed up onto the back of the troll and threw his arms around the beast's thick neck. The troll was so intent on silencing Hermione's screams that he did not even notice the boy scrambling up onto his back until Harry's wand, still clutched tightly in his hand, poked the troll in his beady eye. It only took Harry a moment to realize what had happened.

"Defodio!"

The troll let out another roar of pain as his eye exploded in his head. It was still not enough to put the beast down, but it was enough to

once again make the troll forget about Neville and Hermione. The troll backed up, crushing Harry between its body and the wall behind him. Harry thought the impact must have broken several of his ribs. The pain caused him to let go of the troll's neck and fall to the floor. Turning around, the beast raised his enormous club high over his head and prepared to pulverize Harry's limp form.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

As he lay there waiting for the club to fall, Harry glanced over at the door to see Ron standing there. The red haired boy had levitated the troll's club out of his meaty paw to hang high over his head. Looking dumbfounded, the troll stared up with his one good eye at the club hanging several feet above him. When Ron finally let the gigantic club fall on the beast's upturned face, it made a loud crunching sound. A moment later the monster collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

"Harry!" screamed Hermione, running over to see if he was all right.

That was the last thing Harry remembered before the world went black. It was several hours before he opened his eyes in an unfamiliar room. The room was a bright blur as he reached up to his face and realized that his glasses were gone. He tried to sit up so he could look for them, but the sudden sensation of pain in his chest made him lay right back down again.

"That will be more than enough of that, Mr. Potter," said a woman's voice.

"I see you're awake, Harry," said another voice, this one sounding rather familiar.

Someone gently placed Harry's glasses on his face and the room suddenly came into focus. Sitting next to him was none other than Albus Dumbledore, the old man's eyes sparkling like two sapphires in the sun. For a moment Harry wondered why the Headmaster was there. Then he remembered he had fought a troll with the help of his friends. Reaching up to feel his chest, Harry realized the pain of his

broken ribs was gone. Now there was just the sensation of pressure and a sensation like the beginning of a muscle cramp.

“Madam Pomfrey tells me that she has mended all your broken bones,” smiled Professor Dumbledore. “She has also informed me that you are to stay in the Hospital wing tonight, and that you will be allowed to leave first thing in the morning.”

“What about the others, sir?” Harry asked, desperate to know if his friends were okay.

“Well, after Miss Granger explained that she had tried to subdue the beast by herself, she told us all how you had heard her screaming,” Dumbledore said, his face beaming. “She also told us how, if it had not been for you, Mr. Longbottom, and Mr. Weasley, she would have been killed when she followed it into the bathroom.”

“But, sir,” Harry began to protest, slowly sitting up, but Dumbledore cut him off.

“That is the official story, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said firmly, but kindly. “I was not there so I cannot argue with her claiming full responsibility for the incident. I was forced to take several house points from her due to her poor judgment.”

“But, sir,” Harry began, but Dumbledore cut him off again.

“That is what my report to the Board of Governors will say,” continued Dumbledore, “I feel it only fitting though that you and your friends each receive five house points each for your bravery. Also, I am awarding you an additional five points for the fact that you were able to use a fairly advanced spell to distract the creature so your friends could escape.”

Harry was completely stunned. Not only did he not seem to be in trouble, but now Dumbledore was actually rewarding him for his foolishness. Harry barely heard when Dumbledore excused himself so that Harry’s friends could check up on him. It was only when

Hermione came running across the room to hug him that Harry really understood what was going on.

“You were so brave, Harry,” Hermione sobbed into his shoulder, her arms wrapped tightly around Harry’s neck.

“Too right he was,” beamed Neville, standing just behind Hermione. “Not to mention being a fool for trying to wrestle a troll barehanded.”

“Lucky thing I got there when I did,” laughed Ron. “I think that ruddy beast had taken a liking to you, Harry.”

“I am lucky,” Harry said seriously. “I’d be dead if you hadn’t shown up when you did, Ron.”

“We all would be,” added Hermione, still clutching on to Harry as if he might vanish if she let go.

“Where were you, mate?” Neville asked, looking at Ron. “We were really worried about you.”

Ron bowed his head, taking a deep breath before speaking. “I felt like a real prat after what I said about you, Hermione.”

The young girl finally let go of Harry enough to turn and look through tear-filled eyes up at Ron as he continued. “I just needed to think for a bit, so I went up to Fred and George’s room since I knew no one would look for me there. When I heard everyone returning early from the feast, I asked the twins what was going on and they told me about the troll. I checked our room, but you weren’t there. That’s when Fred and George told me you were in that bathroom, so I bolted before Percy could stop me. You know the rest.”

Now it was Ron’s turn to be attacked by Hermione. She jumped up and hugged him so tightly that Harry could not tell if his face was turning red from embarrassment or lack of oxygen. Whatever the cause, Harry and Neville could hold back their laughter for only so long. Within moments, the whole group was busily talking about the

night's adventure. None of them noticed Madam Pomfrey standing in the shadows of her office, or the tall man standing next to her.

"Let them be for now, Poppy," said the man in a friendly whisper. "They deserve a chance to laugh after what they went through."

"Yes, sir," she whispered back, looking up into the face of the man besides her.

He had such a noble face in her opinion. It was no wonder that so many stories, Muggle and magical alike, had been told about him and his adventures. It almost took her breath away to think that he was standing there besides her now, but it was even more amazing that he was so worried about one little boy. That sense of concern on his part, more than anything, else filled Poppy Pomfrey with a sense of respect for the man beside her even greater than what she felt for Albus Dumbledore.

"He needs to get his rest," smiled the man, "but let them have a little more time together, please?"

"As you wish, Sire," Poppy said with a bow.

"No need for that, Poppy," chuckled the man, stepping deeper into the shadows. "Just call me Mr. Knight, for now."

Poppy Pomfrey wanted to say more, but she knew her Hospital wing like the back of her hand, and she knew that Mr. Knight was gone. Whatever he wanted to call himself, Poppy Pomfrey would do as he asked. These days little girls grew up listening to stories of Harry Potter, and dreamed of someday meeting him, but that had not been the case for Poppy. In her case, she had grown up reading stories of a noble king from long ago, and she had dreamed of some day finding the magic spell that would allow her to meet him. Now, many years later, she knew him instantly when he appeared in her office, and her heart had beat quite a bit faster than it had since she was a little girl.

“Some dreams do come true,” she thought, watching the four children laughing together.

A/N:

Ohai-yo,

Welcome once again to another thrilling chapter of my story. I call it mine but really, I am just modifying the great work of Jo Rowling. I hope that one of these days I will be able to publish my own works and make a name for myself. I can only hope that when that time comes, people will write fan-fiction stories about my books. :)

Anyway, I've just finished chapter 14 and hope to have it typed up and sent off to my lovely betas, C & M, very soon. That will just leave 3 chapters and a short epilogue left to write. How quickly it all flies by. :)

Anyway, go read, and please review. :)

Chris

## Chapter 11: The Golden Snitch

Harry stood looking out over the sunlit grounds of Hogwarts, watching the clouds reflected off the mirror smooth surface of the lake in the distance. He had some free time before classes and wanted to be able to get some flying in, and the grounds were as good a place as any. Mounting his broom, Harry kicked off hard and shot into the air like a cork from a bottle. To Harry, flying reminded him of how free he felt when he was swimming, only on the back of the best broom in the world. He could not have asked for a more perfect morning.

After spending, what seemed like hours spent enjoying the wind in his face, Harry realized it was time for him to land and get inside before he was late for his classes. It was only when Harry turned back towards the school that he noticed something strange about the ground below him. Harry thought at first that he was imagining things because the ground below him seemed to be moving as if it were water, but a quick look at the lake showed that it was still as smooth as glass. Suddenly it was swirling, like water going down a drain. The strange sight continued to shock Harry as the whirlpool below him rotated faster and faster until it was twenty feet across and so deep

that he could barely see the bottom. Harry slowly moved his broom directly over the whirlpool, and saw a sight that left him shocked to the very core.

The walls of the swirling funnel of earth were covered with the faces of people, both known and unknown to Harry. The faces of Ron, Neville, and Hermione were the ones closest to the surface, moving around the maelstrom slower than the rest. Just below the faces of his friends were the faces of Mr. Weasley and his wife, Ginny's face moving even faster just below theirs. He did not recognize the next face, although Harry thought he had seen the young man around the school. He might have been in Hufflepuff or maybe Ravenclaw and Harry thought he had something to do with Quidditch or some other competition.

The next face down was Harry's Uncle Sirius followed by Dumbledore, both of them smiling up at Harry. Right below them was Hedwig and an older man with a strange electric blue eye that kept spinning around in its socket. The old man's face looked as if a wild beast had mauled him, but there was something kind in his real eye that Harry found himself respecting immediately. It was the lowest level that really got Harry's attention. The faces of Harry's Uncle Remus shared that last grouping of faces with his "cousin" Tonks, who was actually Sirius' cousin, and the smiling face of a boy with a camera. It was hard to see them because they were moving around the walls of the whirlpool so fast, but Harry would have known Remus and Tonks anywhere.

Although there was no real sense of danger, Harry knew that those faces near the bottom of the whirlpool were in the worst jeopardy. In fact, he was positive that their lives were at risk because they were so far away from him, and only by bringing them closer to him could he hope to save them. He tried to think of a way to pull them towards him, to keep them close once he did, but the water just kept moving faster. Moment by moment the faces were moving further down, spinning faster as they did, and at any moment Harry was sure he would no longer be able to see them clearly.

Suddenly a glow appeared at the very bottom of the maelstrom. It was a sickly green glow but in its light Harry could very clearly see a



tall figure standing on a pile of six large rocks with rusted chains binding the man to the rock, right at the very bottom of the whirlpool. Although he could not see the man's face because of the cloak the man was wearing, a pair of scarlet eyes stared up at Harry with obvious malice. Suddenly Harry's mind clouded with rage, an overpowering desire to protect the faces he was seeing from the dark man. Without thought or hesitation, Harry pushed his broom over into a steep dive towards the sinister figure. He watched in slow motion as the man lifted his wand to take aim at him with a deathly pale hand that looked more dead than alive to Harry. There was a bright flash of green light, followed by a moment of darkness, and then a beautiful white light. Before he could figure out what had happened, Harry found himself looking at the foot of his bed breathing heavily as sleep faded from his mind. However, unlike most of his dreams, Harry remembered every detail of the dream he had been having a moment before.

"Need to write that one down," he thought to himself, reaching for a roll of parchment and a quill. "Not sure why, but I know it's important. Of course it might help not to eat so much treacle tart before bed, as well."

Looking around his room, Harry remembered that today was his first Quidditch game. Quickly writing down all the details he could remember of his disturbing dream, Harry tried not to think too much about it or the upcoming game. Once he felt he had covered the important images from his dream, he climbed out of bed and opened his trunk. Tucking the scroll under some of his things, Harry concentrated on the events of the past few days since Madame Pomfrey had released him from the hospital wing. Once Madame Pomfrey had agreed to release him, Harry had solemnly promised himself not to end up there again any time soon. Madame Pomfrey was a very nice woman, but not so nice that Harry wanted to spend any more time than he had to under her care. The fact that everyone in the school seemed to know all about their confrontation with the troll had only put Harry in an even brighter spotlight.

Even Ginny seemed to be acting strangely after he wrote her about their adventure. There seemed to be a sense of shyness in her letters now that had never been there before. That had not stopped her from

sending him a letter that could have passed easily for a Howler, minus the deafeningly loud screaming voice. She was extremely upset that he had put himself in so much danger, but she could not fault him for wanting to save the life of a friend. In the end, she told him that he was her hero, even if he did not want to be. Harry just wished that others would stop looking at him like a hero. The fawning looks he was getting from some of the girls in the school, and even a few of the boys, was really starting to get on Harry's nerves. If it were not for his friends, Harry might have hidden in his dorm room until the professors were forced to drag him out, kicking and screaming.

Of course, Harry's friends would have never let him do that no matter how badly he might have wanted to. When he had been attending school back at home, Harry had read about "fellowship of war." It was the way that soldiers fighting together tended to draw closer together after a major battle. That was exactly what had happened in the case of Hermione Granger. After fighting the troll and surviving, Hermione had become the fourth member of their little group. Hermione seemed to have mellowed considerably since she started hanging around with the three boys, and they had seemed to mature a bit as well. Stranger still was how protective Harry felt towards her now.

Since Hermione had joined their little group, Harry had found himself thinking about his relationship with her a great deal. Although Harry knew all about liking and dating girls, he did not feel that he liked her in that way. If he had to say what it was like, Harry would have had to say it was more like the way an older brother would like their little sister. Since he had never had brothers and sisters, Harry could only compare it with relationships he had with other people but it seemed to be stronger than just friendship. He knew that he liked Ginny differently than he liked Hermione, but that might only be the difference between a best friend and a good friend. Whatever it was, Harry promised himself that he would protect Hermione just as he would protect any of his friends. The only thing he would have liked better would have been if she were not always insisting that they get their homework done before having fun together.

Between the four of them, Harry had been surprised to find that homework went far easier now that Hermione was their friend. Each of them had their favorite subjects, and with the studious young witch

checking their assignments for errors, Harry was pleasantly surprised when they all started getting better marks. The only exceptions to their newly established routine were Potions and Herbology. Much to Hermione's surprise, Neville's knowledge of Herbology far surpassed her own. Harry and Ron had taken to betting on which one of the two could get their hand in the air faster when Professor Sprout asked a question. So far, Neville had won Harry several imaginary Galleons with no sign of stopping.

The other surprise, even to Harry, was the fact that he was something of a genius when it came to his Potions class. With the help of his mother's notebooks on the subject, Harry was quickly developing a reputation as a star pupil in the class. Even Snape, no matter how much he tried to hide it, was pleasantly surprised and proud of Harry's blossoming talent. At first, Hermione had not approved of Harry studying both his Potions text and his mother's notes. Finally, Harry had let Hermione read one of the notebooks and she was grudgingly forced to agree that his mother had been a very gifted witch.

There was one other thing that seemed to surprise Hermione a great deal. Just the day before, Harry and the others had been standing outside talking about the upcoming Quidditch match and just enjoying each other's company. Hermione, having quite the talent for it, had conjured a small blue flame inside a jar for them to stand around so that they could warm themselves. Harry was suddenly surprised to see Professor Snape limping towards them, a determined look on the man's face. However, Hermione was frantic, begging the three boys to help her hide the small fire out of fear that Snape would punish her for casting magic outside of class.

"That is very nice spell work, Miss Granger," said the Potions teacher quietly. "Magic is meant to be useful and practical, not just flashy."

"Thank you, Professor," stammered the shocked young girl.

Harry was not really paying attention to what Snape was saying. Instead, he was looking at the professor's leg, and the fact that Snape seemed to be trying to keep his weight off it as much as possible. When Snape noticed what Harry was looking at, the Potions

teacher pulled his cloak tighter around his leg to hide it from view. He did not seem upset with Harry for noticing, but he did seem to be trying to keep his injury as unnoticed as possible.

“Excuse me, Professor,” Harry said quietly, “but are you alright? I mean, well, you’re limping.”

Snape looked at Harry for a moment, the corner of his mouth twitching into something very like a smile before vanishing. “Thank you for asking, but it's nothing for you to be concerned about, Mr. Potter. Good luck in the upcoming game.”

Without another word, Snape limped away leaving Harry to wonder what was wrong with his leg. Thinking back on it, Harry realized that Snape had been limping ever since Halloween. Harry wondered if Snape had been injured while guarding the third floor corridor.

"That was strange," Hermione said suddenly, breaking Harry's train of thought. "I don't think I've ever heard Professor Snape say anything nice before, especially to a Gryffindor student."

"It's one of the perks of being friends with Harry," Neville said with a grin. "Snape seems to like Harry for some odd reason, so he seems to be nice to all of us."

"Strange," she said, looking after the retreating form of Snape. "I never thought Professor Snape liked any students, other than the Slytherins."

"He's really not as bad as everyone says," said Harry, looking at Hermione. "He just does what he has to in order to keep Slytherin house under control."

Hermione had seemed lost in her thoughts after that, for which Harry was grateful. He knew Hermione was right about the Potions professor. Snape did seem to take a great deal of pleasure in tormenting students. As the four friends were walking back to the castle a little while later, Harry could not shake the feeling that he was missing something as far as Professor Snape was concerned. It was

with a bit of relief when Harry looked across the courtyard and saw a familiar face waiting for him. Mr. Knight was standing next to the entrance to the school, waving at Harry and his friends.

“Come on,” Harry said to the others with a grin. “I want you to meet someone.”

Harry led his friends over to where Mr. Knight was waiting patiently for them, a warm and friendly smile on his face. Hermione was looking at the older man with a look of curiosity. He was much taller than the boys, but that was to be expected. Hermione admired his broad shoulders, and could not help but compare them to her three friends, who just could not compete in that department either. Then there was his face, which looked so kind to her. He had a strong jaw and cheekbones that seemed to give his face a sense of strength, in a handsome way. Hermione could not deny it though; his eyes made her knees go weak. They were a pale blue, almost a grey color, and they just seemed to pull her into their depths. Top it all off with his sandy blond hair, and this stranger was a young girl’s ideal of what a knight in shining armor should be. Hermione was anxious to know who he was, but politely waited for Harry to introduce her. One by one, Harry introduced his friends with Mr. Knight shaking each of their hands. When he reached Hermione, Mr. Knight actually bowed deeply to the young girl, taking her hand in his and kissing the back of it softly, causing her to blush furiously.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” said the older man with a warm smile. “Harry has told me wonderful things about you all.”

They all talked excitedly together for several minutes, each of Harry’s friends finding the older man to be quite funny. Soon they were talking about Harry’s upcoming Quidditch match. Neville was willing to bet anyone willing to listen, that he fully expected Harry to catch the Snitch in under a minute. For his part, Harry could only shuffle his feet in embarrassment as Mr. Knight laughed.

“Harry could probably win a Quidditch game with a broken arm and a rogue Bludger chasing him,” laughed Ron.

“You know what, Ron,” said the older man with a strange gleam in his eyes, “I’m sure that if anyone could do it, Harry could. In fact, that is sort of what I wanted to talk to him about today. I don’t suppose you could let me borrow Harry for a few minutes, could you?”

After the others had returned to the castle, Harry and Mr. Knight had walked down towards the lake when Harry asked the question that had been bothering him. “Why does Professor Snape like me and my friends when he seems to hate everyone else?”

“You remind him of your mother, Harry,” said the older man with a kind smile. “They were friends when she was at Hogwarts.”

“When I got my mother’s notebooks from Sirius,” began Harry, looking out over the water, “I saw that there was a second set of handwriting in most of them. I thought the other person had to be my father, but now I think it was someone else. Was it Professor Snape?”

Mr. Knight had turned to Harry with a slightly sad smile. “I think that’s something you should ask him, don’t you?”

“I’ve tried, sir,” whined Harry. “He just ignores the question or dismisses me.”

“Then maybe he has a very good reason for not answering you at this time,” Mr. Knight replied as they reached the edge of the lake. “Give him some time, Harry, and maybe he’ll be ready to answer your question.”

Harry nodded as he thought about what Mr. Knight had said, but he wondered if Mr. Knight knew the answer. Whatever the case, the two of them had a long talk about Quidditch, amongst other things. As far as Harry could tell, there was no real point to their conversation, but he did not mind so long as he was spending time with his old friend. Talking with Mr. Knight always made him feel better about things, and their conversation that day was no different.

Harry made his way down to the Great Hall, leaving Ron and Neville to sleep in, as it was still very early. Thoughts of the impending game

were making Harry more than a little nervous, but he felt confident in his flying abilities. Harry reasoned that if he were that bad, Wood would have replaced him as the Seeker. Instead, Wood had already told Harry more than once that Harry was going to replace him as Captain of the team someday.

Hedwig swooped in to deliver two letters, one from Sirius and one from Ginny. Sirius promised he would be at the game although he might be running late. Ginny could not make the game because her family was so busy, but she wished him well all the same. The letters helped him to feel better, especially the one from Ginny. As he sat in the near silent Hall, Harry focused on the small girl's letter in his hand trying to soak up as much comfort as he could from it.

Eventually, Harry watched as everyone began to filter into the Great Hall. Ron and Neville, followed closely by Hermione, made their way over and took their regular seats next to Harry. It was obvious that they were doing their best to get Harry's mind off the upcoming game, but that did not stop Harry from merely picking at his food. Hermione kept trying to get him to eat, but the food tasted like dust in his mouth. It was with mixed emotions that Harry finally left the table when Wood called out for the team to make their way down to the pitch.

After changing into his Quidditch robes, Harry sat through a long-winded speech by Wood concerning the desire to win. For Harry, each moment was a small eternity that seemed to drag him further and further into blind panic. He figured that at this rate, he would just curl up in a little ball and faint before the game ever got underway. In fact, by the time they all marched out on to the pitch, Harry was looking for a nice dark place to hide.

"No worries, Potter," Wood said with a wide grin. "You'll do fine."

Harry nodded as he walked out onto the sunlit pitch. Moments later, he was in the air and all of his fears and nerves were completely forgotten. The game below Harry was in full swing, but that did not matter to him as he circled the pitch. His eyes scanned the entire area, his mind focused on spotting the Snitch before the Slytherin Seeker did. Time was not the problem, and points were of no concern. Only finding the Snitch was important to Harry right at that moment.

On his third pass around the pitch, Harry noticed Sirius standing with his friends. They had a large banner that proclaimed “Potter Rules” in scarlet and gold letters. Harry waved at them before refocusing on the game. That was when he first felt it. At first, it was just a slight shudder in the way his broom flew and how the broom seemed to fight his control. Harry started talking softly to the broom, begging it not to do this to him now, and the broom suddenly stopped vibrating. It was a good thing, because right then he saw it. In the distance, maybe fifty or sixty feet higher, Harry saw the Snitch. Putting on an amazing burst of speed, Harry zoomed towards the Snitch as it continued to rise into the air. All he could hear was the wind roaring past his ears as he stretched out his hand to grab the shining little orb.

Suddenly, without any warning, Harry’s broom stopped dead in the air. Before Harry even knew what was going on, he shot over the handle of the broom and flew into the air. His hand caught the Snitch tightly in his grasp, but suddenly winning the game seemed to pale in comparison to the fact that he was falling towards the ground far below him. Harry had not realized how high he had been, but now he knew without a doubt that a fall from this height would be the end of him. A strange memory came to Harry as he plummeted toward the ground. It was the memory of him standing outside with the other students during their first flying lesson. Madame Hooch had just instructed them to command their broom up into their hands, and Harry’s had snapped up into his as soon as he said it. Rolling over in the air, and trying to forget that he was falling, Harry looked up at his still frozen broom and stretched out his free hand to it.

“TO ME!” he roared.

To his amazement, there was a brief pulse of dark green light from the broom before it suddenly zoomed to his hand. The sound that the broom made as it connected with his hand was both startling and comforting. Harry’s hand stung from the contact, but he did not let go. Using the momentum of the broom, Harry swung back up onto it just in time to see the ground rushing up towards him. With barely a moment to spare, Harry pulled up hard on the broom’s handle, leveling out and skimming across the green grass in a blur of speed.



When he finally came to a stop, planting both feet firmly on the ground once more, Harry looked first at his broom and then at the Golden Snitch still fluttering weakly in his hand. It struck him how quiet the pitch was, and looking up Harry saw that no one was moving. Not a spectator or player moved. If not for the pennants flapping in the wind, Harry would have thought time had stopped completely. As he lifted the hand with the Snitch in it high into the air, he watched the other players slowly land without a sound.

“Gryffindor wins,” said the commentator, Fred and George’s friend Lee Jordan, so quietly that Harry barely noticed it.

Then, as if someone had set off a bomb, the crowd erupted into an ear-splitting roar of applause and shouts. Time seemed to move again as Harry watched his friends, and Sirius rushing towards him. Even Dumbledore was there, although he seemed to be holding back as he watched the rest talking to Harry. In fact, if Harry had to guess, he would have said that Dumbledore looked troubled by something.

“That was bloody wicked, Harry,” shouted Ron over the din of the crowd around them.

“Language, Ron,” scolded Hermione, although she did not seem that serious about it.

“I’ve never seen anything like that, mate,” Neville added, looking as if he was about to leap into the air with excitement.

“Not even your father could have done something like that, Harry,” Sirius said finally, wrapping Harry in a backbreaking hug. “I was terrified, but amazed. Wherever she is, I’m sure your mother is worried sick about you right now. Of course, I’m also sure that both of them are extremely proud of you.”

Harry had no idea how to react to Sirius’ words. Being compared to his father, and being told his parents would be proud of him, was something that Harry had never expected. Still, Harry’s heart seemed to be a little lighter after hearing his uncle’s words. As his friends and Sirius led him back up to the common room, Harry could not help but

smile to himself. It was only with a glance over his shoulder that Harry saw that two people did not seem to be happy for him. Dumbledore still stood apart from the rest of the school, watching Harry with a troubled expression on his face. The other was Quirrell, busy straightening his turban, his face a mask of rage and fury. Neither man seemed to notice that they stood at opposite ends of the field, and neither seemed to care that they stood in the lengthening shadow of Harry as he walked towards the school.

That night, when he returned to his room in Gryffindor tower, Harry could not wait to write to Ginny to tell her all about the day's events. The others were still down in the common room celebrating with the rest of the Gryffindor students, but Harry could not take another retelling of his catch. Everyone acted as if Harry had done something amazing, but he knew better. As he started writing, Harry just hoped people would soon forget about his catch and remember that it was a team effort that won the game.

Ginny,

What a day! We won the game! I was so nervous at first but as soon as I was on my broom, and in the air, I forgot all about that. It was amazing, Ginny. I mean, I love flying, but this was something more than just flying. Before your brothers tell you anything, I did fall off my broom before catching the Snitch, but I managed to climb back on before I could get hurt. So, I don't want you worrying about me, okay? I promise, I'm fine.

After the game, we all went to Hagrid's hut with my Uncle Sirius. It was actually a lot of fun. I had no idea that Hagrid and Sirius knew Neville's parents. I don't know the whole story, and no one really wanted to push Neville to tell us, but I think his parents are still alive. Maybe you could ask your mum and da about it. They might tell you about it. I wouldn't ask, but Neville just looked so sad about the whole thing and I'm worried about him.

I also found out that Hagrid owns that bloody three-headed dog I told you about. He let it slip when we were talking about all the animals he's raised. Would you believe that thing's name is Fluffy? I mean

seriously, who would name a beast like that Fluffy, other than Hagrid? Funny thing is, Sirius got him to admit that Fluffy is guarding something in the school. I don't know what it is yet, but I do have a clue about it.

Whatever the dog is hiding is the same thing that Hagrid took from Gringotts the day we all went there. He sort of implied that we should keep our noses out of it, but that's when he slipped up and gave us our clue. He was ranting about us not having any business messing around with something that was "between Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel." Now I know I've heard that name before, but I can't seem to remember where. It's right on the tip of my tongue.

Anyway, Christmas holiday is almost here and if you aren't busy, maybe you could come round our place for Boxing Day? Could you see what your mum has to say?

I'll write again soon,

Harry.

Ohai-yo,

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. They always find a way to make me sound far better than I really am.

Short not to follow chapter. :)

Now go read.

Chris

PS. Thanks for 20K hits. :)

## Chapter 12: The Father's Cloak

Things had moved so fast after Harry's first Quidditch game that it was something of a shock to him when the Christmas holiday arrived. Between all the rumors running around the school regarding the events of the game, and the discovery of what Fluffy was guarding, Harry felt that his mind was a jumble of thoughts and feelings. He just hoped that over the Christmas holiday he might be able to get some quiet time to absorb it all. What with the way things had developed, Harry figured he was going to have plenty of time for sorting things out.

Ginny had written him saying that she and her parents would be going to visit her brother Charlie in Romania over the holiday, which meant he would not see her until the end of term. He actually felt a bit jealous of her trip, since Charlie worked on a dragon preserve and Harry would have loved to see a real dragon. Add to that the sudden announcement by Sirius and Remus that a last minute emergency had come up and they would be unable to spend Christmas with him. This was turning out to be a rather disappointing Christmas for Harry. Fortunately, Ron and the twins would be staying with him at Hogwarts, that would help relieve some of the boredom. Percy was also staying, but he would be far too busy studying alone in his dorm for anyone to know the older Weasley brother was there.

The one good thing about spending the holiday at the castle was the lack of students. Rumors that Harry could do wandless magic had

begun making their way around the school even before Harry had reached the castle after his triumphant first Quidditch game. Everyone in the stands had seen Harry's terrifying fall from his broom, and they had all seen him summon it to him without use of a wand. No matter how many times Harry explained that he had only done what they had all done during their first flying lesson, no one seemed to understand. Even Hermione was of the opinion that Harry had done something unique, and nothing he said was going to change her mind on the topic.

"But you did it, too," Harry had said to her before she boarded the Express to head home for the holidays. "That first lesson, when we were learning how to fly, we all summoned our brooms into our hands without using our wands."

"That was just a simple command," Hermione had replied. "What you did was much different. What we did in class was only to summon the broom up from the ground, but you summoned your broom to you from much farther away."

On and on it had gone, with Hermione still arguing her point as she stuck her head out the carriage window before it rolled away to take her and Neville to the Hogsmeade station. Neville and Hermione had promised to write while they were gone even though Harry had thought they would have far better things to do. In any case, Harry just wanted everyone to forget about what had happened during the game so he could return to his normal life at school. Ron supported him in this since the youngest Weasley boy had heard Hermione's arguments so many times over the last few weeks that he could not bear to hear them anymore.

"She's mental, mate. It's not like your answer is going to change if she just keeps hounding you enough," Ron said with a chuckle.

"Wish she would figure that out," Harry laughed.

"Don't worry, mate," Ron said patting Harry's shoulder. "Give it some time and she'll either figure it out, or we'll turn another troll loose on her."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before Ron spoke up. "You're supposed to tell me that wasn't a funny joke, Harry."

"I'm still debating it though," Harry said with a straight face. "I'd feel sorry for the troll. It's too cruel to imagine setting Hermione loose on the beast, so we probably shouldn't do that to a defenseless troll."

"Prat," chuckled Ron, as they headed back up to their common room.

As he sat on his bed Christmas Eve, his eyes heavy from a long day spent outside with Ron and the twins, Harry thought about all the things that had happened since the game. First, there had been Ginny's surprising reply to Harry's letter. To everyone's surprise, and Hermione's immense shock, Ginny had immediately replied to Harry's letter, telling everyone all about who Nicholas Flamel was. Harry had forgotten that he had sent Ginny the Wizard's trading card he had gotten from the chocolate frog package on the train. However, Ginny had not forgotten it and remembered the name instantly. Within a matter of minutes of sharing the news with his friends, Hermione had come running down from her room with a book that was nearly as large as she was. After reading the passage relating to Nicholas Flamel, it all clicked in Harry's mind.

"The Philosopher's Stone," he had said quietly to his friends. "That's what Fluffy is guarding."

"Which explains why someone wants to get their hands on it," added Neville.

Ron nodded before adding, "Too right. Immortality and all the gold you could ever want, who wouldn't want that?"

"I wouldn't," Harry said firmly. "Makes sense why Quirrell is after it though. Ponce like that, I'd bet he's out to make a few Galleons and live forever."

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione had said with a shake of her head. “You don’t know for sure that it’s Quirrell who’s after the stone. I mean, he is a professor after all.”

“I just don’t trust the man, Hermione,” Harry had told her firmly. “He acts all timid, but then I see him looking at me when he thinks I don’t know, and it’s not fear I see in his eyes, it’s pure hate.”

Whatever the case, Harry had started to keep a much closer eye on the stuttering professor since their discovery. Sometimes Quirrell seemed like a different person, usually when he did not think anyone was watching him. The moment someone was around, Quirrell went back to cowering. The problem was Harry could never catch him doing it unless he was alone. That meant he had no way of proving his suspicions to anyone. Harry was hoping that over the holiday, he would be able to convince Fred and George to trail Quirrell, but so far, he had not seen them in order to ask.

The next morning Harry woke up to find a rather large pile of presents on his trunk. Ron was already tearing open his with a look of absolute delight on his face.

“Happy Christmas, Harry!” shouted the excited red head. “Looks like you got an impressive haul this year.”

Harry had to agree because the pile of presents was rather a large one. Harry only waited long enough to put his glasses on before he dug into the mound of gifts. The first present contained a hand carved flute from Hagrid. Harry blew on it a few times and was instantly reminded of Hedwig’s hooting. Next was a book from Neville about wand care. Harry laughed as he showed it to Ron because everyone was always telling him to clean his wand more often. Then there were the presents from Ron and Hermione. Both of them had given him boxes of candy, which Harry thought was great because he still remembered how they had all shared the candy he bought on the Express the first day he met them.

Sirius’ present was a practice Snitch that was enchanted not to get lost or wander off. Remus had given Harry a book about defensive

spells and their best uses in real wizard duels. Mr. Knight had also sent a book, "1001 Strategies for Wizard's Chess," which Ron was quickly begging to read through. Next was a large and rather lumpy package from Ron's mother. Harry had only met the woman once, but she had been kind enough to make him a beautiful emerald green jumper. She had also included a tin of homemade fudge that proved instantly to Harry that she was the greatest cook in the world.

"Mum made you a Weasley sweater," Ron chuckled. "I told her it was your first Christmas away from your uncles. I guess she thought you needed something to cheer you up."

"It's brilliant, Ron," Harry said with a smile, pulling the sweater on over his head. "Tell her I love it, and tell her I said thanks."

"You got it, mate," said the blushing boy with a smile.

The last two presents were a little strange. Neither had a nametag or card attached to them. Picking up the smaller of the two packages, Harry tore it open and found two items inside. The first was a box of assorted Honeyduke's chocolates that Ron instantly started eyeing. Underneath the box of candy was something that Harry liked even better than the chocolates. It was a picture of Ginny in a plain Muggle frame. In the picture, Ginny was sitting under a tree in a white sundress, her feet tucked under her. She seemed to be making a crown of wildflowers; at least she was until the image noticed Harry looking at it. With a brilliant smile, and an obvious blush, Ginny's image smiled up at Harry and waved. Harry suddenly felt a surge of warmth in his chest as he looked at the picture before putting it on his nightstand where he could easily see it.

"What's that, Harry?"

"Ginny sent me a picture of herself," Harry said, trying not to sound as if he liked it too much.

"Mental, that's what she is," Ron sighed. "Least it will scare off any rats that try to hide in here."



Harry did not say a word as he picked up his last present. The last present was actually a bit of a mystery. Once again, there was no tag or card attached, and it felt rather light considering how large it appeared. Untying it, Harry was surprised when something like liquid silver poured out of the wrapping and pooled around his feet. Surprised, Harry reached down and picked up what seemed to be a cloak of some sort. It was as light as a feather even though it looked large enough to cover several people at once.

“Blimey, Harry!” Ron said suddenly. “I know what that is. They are supposed to be really rare.”

“What is it?” Harry asked, putting the robe on.

“Look down,” laughed Ron.

Harry was in complete amazement when he realized he could no longer see his body. There was not even a ripple in the air when he lifted his hand inside the cloak, waving it in front of his face.

“Brilliant!” smiled Harry as he looked over at his friend. “An invisibility cloak.”

“Yeah, but who sent it to you?” said Ron, looking through the wrapping paper Harry had dropped.

Inside the paper was a small card, which Ron handed to Harry before sitting back down on his bed. Harry slipped out of the cloak and tossed it to Ron to try on before he opened the card. The handwriting was rather feminine, all loops and flourishes. There were only a few lines written in the card, but they still seemed to knock the wind out of Harry. Sitting back down on his bed, Harry tossed the card over to where Ron had been a moment before. An invisible hand picked the card up and began to read.

“Your father kindly let me borrow this just before he died,” said Ron’s bodiless voice. “It is time it was returned to you. Use it well, and a very Merry Christmas to you.”

Ron slid the cloak off his shoulders and handed it back to Harry. "What the heck does that mean? 'Use it well'?"

Harry took the cloak from Ron and looked at it for a moment before answering. "No idea, Ron."

Further discussion had to wait for later as the Weasley twins suddenly burst through the door, each wearing hand knitted sweaters from their mother. Unlike the maroon one that Ron had received, the twins' jumpers had their initials in bright yellow letters. They joked about it for a while, but Harry could see that they were not serious. Quickly shoving the cloak under his pillow, Harry enjoyed the company of the Weasleys as he listened to stories about their family and Christmas around the burrow. Overall, it was a very pleasant morning, rounded out by a massive snowball fight down by the lake. When the four boys made their way up to the castle several hours later, Harry had almost completely forgotten about missing Sirius and Remus.

After warming up and changing into dry clothes, Harry and the Weasley boys made their way down to the Great Hall for the Christmas feast. There were hardly any students at the feast, just a few older students and a handful of first years, but that only seemed to make the food all that much better. Harry ate far more than was good for him, but he could not seem to help himself. Soon they were all sitting around, joking and laughing in the common room again. If it were not for the fact that Harry's uncles were not there, he would have said it was one of the best Christmases he had ever had.

When he finally made his way up to his dorm, Harry felt tired but completely content with the day. At least he did until he slipped into his bed and noticed a large lump under his pillow. Suddenly wide-awake, Harry reached under his pillow and pulled out his father's invisibility cloak. Holding the cloak in his hand, he kept looking between it and the picture of Ginny next to his bed. Of his presents, those two affected him the most. While Ginny's picture seemed to fill his chest with a sensation of warmth and comfort, the cloak pulled at him with thoughts of adventure and mystery. In the end, being only eleven years old, the call of the cloak won out.

Slipping out of bed as quietly as he could, Harry slipped the cloak over his shoulders. His heart was racing, and his mind swirled with half formed thoughts of adventures he would have. Pulling the hood up over his head, he slipped out of his dorm room and down the stairs to the common room. Fred and George were still talking by the fireplace, but they were so absorbed in their own conversation that they did not even notice as Harry slipped out the portrait hole.

Once Harry was outside the tower and in the corridor, he felt a sensation of overwhelming freedom, as if he owned all of Hogwarts. Over the course of an hour, Harry had managed to do several things he had always wanted to do but never been allowed. The first was to run down to the Great Hall and sit in Dumbledore's chair at the teachers' table which was quickly followed by Harry heading up to Quirrell's classroom and making several rude hand gestures at the classroom door. Harry was just about to enter the library, fully intending to run through the maze of books, when he heard Filch's voice coming from inside.

"I'm not sure, Professor," he was saying to someone. "I could have sworn I had closed the doors to the Great Hall, but they were wide open when I went down a little while back. That can only mean a student is out of bed, sir."

"Well they can't be far," said a voice that Harry instantly recognized as belonging to Professor Snape. "I'll catch those Weasley twins this time, Filch. You just wait and see."

"Bloody hell," thought Harry as he backed away slowly from the library doors, "just what I don't need. If I get caught out after curfew by Filch and Snape, I don't think it will matter how much Snape likes me."

As soon as he could, Harry took off at a run from the library. Soon Harry was panting as he ducked into an empty classroom and closed the door behind him. Harry glanced around the room and realized that it was being used to store old desks and chairs. From the look of all the discarded tables and chairs stacked up in the room, Harry didn't think that anyone had stepped foot in the room for many years.

The one exception was a large mirror leaning against the far wall. Even though everything else was covered with a thick layer of dust, including the floor, the mirror looked as if it had just been put there that day.

Harry walked over to the mirror and examined the golden frame. He stood beside the mirror and ran his hand slowly over the surface of it before looking up at the top and noticing the engraving there. Looking up, Harry moved in front of the mirror and read the odd inscription.

“Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi,” he read aloud. “What the heck language is that. It’s sure not Latin. Sounds more like... no... couldn’t be.”

Harry could not help but laugh at how silly it really was. “I show not your face, but your heart’s desire.”

“It’s bloody backwards. Who in the world thought that up?” thought Harry as he finally looked down at the mirror.

Harry’s jaw dropped as he looked at his reflection in the mirror, only it was not just his reflection. Two other people images were reflected in the mirror, standing just behind him, although their faces were hidden in shadows. Whipping around, Harry looked over his shoulder but there was no one behind him. Then he remembered the inscription.

“It shows my heart’s desire,” he said turning and looking at the mirror again.

Taking a closer look at the people standing behind him, Harry knew exactly who they were. Slowly the faces of the two people standing behind him in the mirror became clearer, and Harry could only smile. There were pictures of them all over his house, but this was better than any picture he had ever seen of them

“Hi, mum,” Harry whispered. “Hi, da.”

Both figures smiled out at Harry as they placed their hands on the shoulders of his reflection. That was when Harry noticed that his

reflection looked older than he really was. If Harry had to guess, he would say that his reflection seemed at least three or four years older, and a good deal taller. He was still watching the faces of his parents when he started to see another figure walking out of the shadows behind his parents. Unfortunately, it was right then that Mrs. Norris walked into the room, almost catching Harry before he could get the cloak back over himself. Harry suddenly realized that he had to get back to Gryffindor tower before he was missed, or worse, caught. When Harry crawled into bed fifteen minutes later, he could only wonder who the other figure had been in the mirror.

Over breakfast the next morning, Harry told Ron all about his grand adventure the night before. Ron was, of course, disappointed that Harry had not taken him along with him on his midnight romp through the castle, but he understood Harry's desire to use his father's cloak alone the first time. There was also the fact that Harry had promised to take Ron along with him when he returned to see the mirror that night.

"I can't wait to see your parents, Harry," Ron said with an honest smile. "Then you can see the rest of my family. You know most of them already, but I can't wait for you to see Charlie and Bill. They're the coolest."

"Sounds like it," Harry smiled back. "Ginny said that Bill has a dragon tooth earring. I bet that looks cool."

The two boys had originally planned to spend the day outside again, but a blizzard had rolled in overnight and they were forced to stay inside. Instead, they spent the day in the Gryffindor common room, playing Wizard's chess and talking about ways to get Malfoy expelled from school. Of course, none of the ideas would actually work, but it was still fun to talk about. Harry just liked talking with his friend, and Ron liked finding someone to play chess with. They continued like that for the rest of the day, only taking enough time to run down to the Great Hall to grab something to eat.

When it was finally time to turn in for the night, neither boy was really sleepy. Instead their minds were racing with vague ideas of what

adventures they might find that night thanks to Harry's invisibility cloak. Once they were sure that the common room was empty, they quietly made their way down to the portrait hole before Harry pulled the cloak over both of them, and they stepped out into the corridors of Hogwarts. Harry could not wait to see the mirror again, and Ron was nearly as excited by the idea as his friend. It took them nearly an hour to find the old classroom, but find it they did.

Pulling the cloak off them, Harry stepped up to the mirror and watched as once again the image of his parents slowly walked out of the shadowy background to stand behind the older version of him. Only this time they were not alone. At first, he was confused by what he saw, but it only took an instant for Harry to realize who the other person was. Even though she looked older than he remembered her, there was no mistaking that the young woman that now stood beside his reflection was Ginny Weasley. She looked to be almost the same age as Harry's reflection, but more surprising was the fact that she reached out with her left hand to take his right one in hers. There was a flash of light from her hand, and Harry saw that there was a ring on her left hand.

"Budge up, mate," Ron said from behind Harry, causing him to jump. "Let me see your parents."

Harry was about to tell Ron the mirror was no longer working, but luck worked in his favor before he could speak. "I just see you, Harry. I mean it looks like a regular mirror to me."

Letting out a relieved sigh, Harry stepped out of the way so Ron could get a better look.

"Try it now, Ron," he said pointing to where he had been standing a moment before. "It might only work for one person at a time."

Ron moved to stand in front of the mirror properly, and immediately looked as if he had just been punched in the gut. "Blimey! I'm older, and I'm head boy! Look at that, I'm also Quidditch Captain. There's someone else walking towards me. It's a girl, and she's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen..."

Ron trailed off suddenly, and Harry saw that his friend was now blushing so badly that he looked like he would glow in a dark room. Harry watched as a strange smile spread over Ron's face, his hand slowly going to his cheek and touching it as if someone had just touched him there. Ron closed his eyes, slowly turning away from the mirror, and then walked away with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I don't know what that mirror is, Harry," whispered Ron. "Whatever it is, we should leave it alone. It doesn't feel right to me."

Harry was rather surprised at Ron's words, but then Ron had not seen what Harry had seen. Ron just saw himself winning trophies and some girl, but Harry had seen his family. His family and Ginny. He could not turn away from that, could he? Did he really want to? Moving to once again stand fully in front of the mirror, and looked at the images it held for him.

"It's fine for Ron to want to walk away from this," Harry thought, his temper starting to build. "He's got it all. Yeah, I've got Sirius and Remus, but he's got a mum that tucked him in at night. He's got a da that probably taught him cool Quidditch moves, or had "the talk" with him without stammering. Not to mention that Ginny looks so pretty..."

Harry stopped and shook his head to clear the strange thoughts of jealousy from it. "Where did that come from?"

Feeling ashamed of himself for wallowing in his jealous thoughts, Harry turned away from the mirror and walked over to stand beside Ron. The red haired boy looked at Harry with a sad smile that he returned. Ron was right, there was something wrong with the mirror, no matter what it might show him.

"Let's get out of here," Harry finally said, pulling the cloak over them once again. "I don't think I want to see that thing again."

"Too right, mate," Ron agreed as they walked out of the room together.

No sooner had the door closed behind them then a tall figure stepped out of the shadows with a troubled expression on his face. Walking silently over to the mirror, Albus Dumbledore wondered what had gone wrong with his carefully crafted plan. According to his estimates of Harry's need to be accepted and loved by a real family, the boy should have only turned away from the mirror if forced to. Even then, Harry should have been drawn back to the room again the following night. That was when Dumbledore had planned to confront him and explain the true power of the mirror. It was also when he planned on giving Harry another piece in of the puzzle so that the boy could eventually find the Stone. Instead, not only Harry but also his friend had been able to turn away from the mirror without any type of confrontation between them.

A sound outside the room, the charm that Dumbledore had placed to scare the boys into leaving, sounded outside the door. They had not even stayed long enough to hear it. They had managed to break away from the mirror faster than even he had when first confronted with it. Even Nicholas had taken longer. He was stunned but he wondered if there were other forces at work on the two boys.

"Yes," Dumbledore whispered to himself. "That must be it. It is not that their willpower is stronger than mine, but that something else is affecting them."

"Keep telling yourself that, old man," said a voice from directly behind Dumbledore.

Spinning around as fast as he could, Dumbledore pulled his wand and pointed it at the man standing there. It was only when he looked closer that he realized his wand was not in his hand anymore. In fact, the man before him was currently using it to scratch his scalp.

"I told you once before," Mr. Knight said in a deathly quiet voice, "any decision you make concerning that boy will be seen by me."

"How did you get in to my school?" demanded Dumbledore, his customary twinkle missing from his eyes.



“Your school? Don’t make me laugh. You can’t keep me out of Hogwarts anymore than you can keep the air out of the sky,” replied Mr. Knight. “This was my home long before Godric and his friends turned it into a school. I can think of many people over the centuries that have had more right to call this place home rather than you, and one of them just left with his friend a few minutes ago.”

“He is a very special boy,” Dumbledore said, trying to sound as if he actually understood what the former monarch was saying.

“Don’t act like you know what’s going on, Albus,” sighed Mr. Knight. “You don’t have a clue, but I think before all of this is over you’ll figure it out. Personally, I can’t wait to see the look on your face.”

“Did you just come here to gloat?”

“Not really,” replied Mr. Knight, walking to stand next to the mirror. “I came to warn you. Stop interfering in Harry’s life. Imagine my surprise when I realized that after all the changes I had made, Harry’s life had been drawn right back into the familiar old patterns. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Albus?”

“I had to guide the boy,” defended the Headmaster. “He must be guided down the right path. He...”

“SILENCE!” roared the figure in front of Dumbledore.

Gone was the gentle seeming image of Mr. Knight, in his faded jeans and jumper. The man that stood before him now in all his royal finery was Arthur Pendragon, King of the Britons, and Dumbledore knew it. If he could have run away right then, he would have, but the eyes of the man in front of him held Dumbledore tighter than any spell ever could.

“You have no right to interfere in that boy’s life,” snarled the former king. “This is your last warning, Albus. Either you will aid the boy honestly, with no ulterior motive, or you will stay out of his way. If you cross me again by trying to control his life like a backstage puppet master, I will see to it that you pay for your foolishness.”

"There are things that must happen in order for the boy to be ready when Tom returns," countered Dumbledore.

"Yes there are, Albus," replied Arthur. "But tricking the boy into fighting your battles by placing the mirror in his path is not the way to go about it. Quit trying to impress everyone with how clever you are and just talk to the boy."

"He's too young to understand."

"If you truly believe that, then you are not as clever as you think you are," Arthur sighed. "He's not like you or Tom, Albus. He does not crave power and he never will."

"I'm only trying to do what's best for the boy," stammered Dumbledore, trying to regain some measure of dignity.

"I told you before," said the man quietly, "you do not know what is best for the boy. When will you finally understand that and stop playing this game? I know what you see in that mirror, Albus."

Mr. Knight waved his hand at the mirror and an image appeared in it that caused the old man to turn away. "I know what your heart's desire is, Albus, and it is not to help that boy."

Tossing the Headmaster his wand, Mr. Knight turned and left the room without another word. Dumbledore reached down to pick his wand back up before looking at the mirror again. Reflected in its depths were the images of four people. One was a much younger version of himself, cocky and arrogant looking. The smallest was a small girl, her eyes seeming slightly out of focus as she smiled out at him. Then there was the third, looking slightly younger than the first boy, but with the same striking blue eyes. It was the last boy that caused Dumbledore to look away. His face had haunted Dumbledore's dreams for most of his life.

"Damn you, Gellert," whispered Dumbledore as he turned and walked out of the room. "Damn us both."

Harry was pleasantly unaware of any of what was taking place back in the old classroom. He was too busy writing a letter to Ginny. The moment he had returned to his dorm with Ron, Harry had jumped into bed and pulled out some parchment and a quill. He felt an overwhelming desire to write to Ginny all about what had happened. He even came close to writing about seeing her in the mirror, but the blush that would cover his face each time he thought about it was enough to stop him. Instead, he told her everything else, including how Ron had been the first to turn away from the mirror.

Several scrolls of parchment later, this letter had turned into more of a small book, and Harry finally tied the scroll closed and set it down on his bedside table. Seeing the picture of Ginny that sat on it, Harry rolled over on his belly and stared at it in the dim light of the room. Ginny's image continued to weave the flowers together, occasionally waving out at him before continuing to work. If he was honest with himself, he had seen prettier girls since he had arrived at school. Still, there was something about Ginny that called out to him.

"Is that how she will look in a few years?" he thought to himself, remember how she had looked in the mirror.

Remembering that image made his belly tighten up, and filled him with a strange feeling that he did not understand. It was not a bad feeling. It just felt to Harry as if something were missing. What that something was, he could not have said. What he did know was that he could not imagine anything that would ever come between him and Ginny. With that thought firmly in his mind, Harry closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep.

His dreams that night were a strange jumble of dreams all rolled into one. There were parts where he was flying through the air, playing Quidditch against a gigantic black dragon. A moment later he would be standing by the lake, Ginny standing beside him with her hand in his. Then he would be standing in knee-deep snow in a graveyard, looking down at the names of his parents on the base of a large statue. The images continued to pass through his dreams, with more and more of them being him and Ginny together. That alone brought a smile to the sleeping boy's face.

When he finally awoke the next morning, Harry still wore the smile he had been wearing in his sleep. He felt better than he had felt in a long time. He did not remember the dream that had lasted all night for him, but he did remember the feeling of warmth that had filled his heart. He carried that feeling with him the rest of the day, and into his dreams again the next night. In fact, he carried that feeling with him all the rest of his holiday. Each night he dreamed of Ginny, and each day he felt as if all the warmth in the world had decided to fill his chest.

AN:

Well if you made it this far then you are probably wondering if this is going to be an anti-Dumbledore story? Let me answer that by saying that next to Harry and Ginny, Dumbledore is one of my favorite characters in the HP books. I will just say that for now, Dumbledore serves a purpose to this story and if his actions seem a bit out of character then ask yourself this... If a control freak suddenly loses control, what is he most likely to do?

I hope you can forgive me and keep on reading and reviewing.

Till next time,

Chris

Ohai-yo,

We'll here we are, the beginning of the end. Chapter 13 was the first chapter that I completely scrapped and rewrote by hand. I think you will appreciate that change as I think it made the whole thing feel much better. We'll see what you have to say.

I should warn you all, there is a great deal of fluffiness in this chapter as our young heroes continue to mature and grow. Many of you have wondered if I have jumped the gun a little bit with their growing awareness of the world around them, especially where relationships are concerned. I think it fairly natural for them to be moving in this direction early due to the situations they have already faced, including being away from their home and parents for the first time. Hogwarts may be a magical school, but that does not mean that these kids would not have had to grow up very fast. Even Jo knew this, which is why she made the legal age for the Magical world 17, rather than 18 or 21. That's just my opinion though.

I'm currently typing up 14 and 15, after they're done I'll ship them off to my betas and get to them to you as soon as possible. I'm almost done writing 16 and hope to have it type up soon as well.

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. They always find a way to make me sound far better then I really am.

Now go read, and please review.

Chris

### Chapter 13: The Philosopher

Harry had read about a game played by deranged or thrill seeking Muggles called "Russian Roulette." Until recently, he had never understood why anyone would play such an insane game, but in the weeks following the start of the new term he understood exactly how it felt to play. Sleep had become Harry's own personal version of the game, each and every night. His dreams were either of Ginny, filling him with a sense of warmth, or they were filled with images of his parents' death. It was more often the later of the two.

It had all started with Harry's first Defense Against the Dark Arts class of the term. Quirrell had been his regular stuttering, and obviously false, self during the class. Within moments of the start of class, Harry's head had started to hurt. By the time the class was over and they walked out the door, he felt as if someone had been trying to burn their way into his head through the scar on his forehead. That night had been the first night he had experienced the dream about his parents' death, and since that night had had suffered countless repetitions of his mother's screams and flashes of green light. At least, he thought it was his mother, because sometimes it sounded like Ginny.

Ron and Neville had both noticed that Harry was having problems sleeping. More than once, one or the other had shaken him awake when he started screaming in his sleep. Harry told his three friends all about the dreams, hoping that one of them might have an explanation or solution for the dreams, but they were all just as confused by the dreams as he was. As for his dreams concerning Ginny, Harry did not dare tell the boys about those, fearing Ron's reaction to Harry dreaming about his sister.

Harry saved the conversations about Ginny for when he and Hermione were alone. He figured that if anyone would understand what he was feeling, it would be Hermione. She would just sit and listen as he explained to her how the dreams seemed to calm his mind and soothe his spirit. Hermione would just sit and listen quietly while he told her about the most recent dreams he had experienced, often wearing a thoughtful and somewhat wistful expression as he talked. One day, after telling Hermione about his most recent dream, she had suddenly stood up from her seat across from him in the common room. Walking silently over to one of the tower windows, Harry watched her stare out at the ground below. Harry followed her over to the window, trying to figure out what was wrong with her.

"As long as I can remember," she whispered, "I have dreamed that someday a knight riding on a white horse would come rescue me."

Harry listened to her talk; it was only fair that he should since she had done the same for him. "For a little while I thought I had finally found

him, but I was wrong. You on the other hand met the one you are looking for, before you even realized you were looking for her. Now you are dreaming about her. Is that really so strange, Harry?"

"I wasn't looking for anyone," protested Harry. "It's just these strange dreams I keep having."

Hermione turned to face him, a strangely sad smile on her face. "How often do you two write each other?"

"I don't know," Harry said with a slight blush. "A few times a week, maybe."

"Try almost every day," she replied with that same sad smile. "Don't try to deny it, Harry. I've seen you running down to the Owlery before breakfast so many times that I'm surprised you don't do it in your sleep. Not to mention that there is rarely a day that goes by when Hedwig doesn't bring you a letter from Ginny."

"But that's just because she's one of my best friends," protested Harry. "That doesn't mean I was looking for her."

"What's your last thought of the night, Harry?" Hermione asked, turning to look back out the window.

Harry wanted to say it was anything other than Ginny, but he could not bring himself to lie to Hermione.

"I'll take your silence as the answer to my question," she said quietly. "I would guess that she is also the first thing on your mind in the morning, or very close to it."

Once again, Harry wanted to tell Hermione that she was completely off the mark, but the words just would not come.

"I guess I was right about that as well," Hermione sighed. "You're lucky, Harry. You found someone who is your best friend, and who you feel so strongly about. I really envy you. I wish someone felt the same way about me as you feel about Ginny."

Hermione drifted off into silence, and suddenly something clicked in Harry's mind. The way Hermione had followed them around, even when they had treated her badly. The way she always listened to everything Harry said, even when Ron or Neville were talking as well. It all made sense to him suddenly, including how he felt about Ginny.

"But I don't feel the same way about Hermione as I do about Ginny," he thought to himself. "I've never had one before, but I imagine that she is closer to being a sister than anything else."

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he finally said. "You're right, I just hadn't looked at it before."

"You have nothing to feel sorry about, Harry," she said softly, but Harry cut her off by putting his arm around her shoulder.

"Yes, I do," he said gently. "I've been so absorbed in my own problems that I forgot to look around. Maybe if I had, I would have noticed that someone important to me was hurting. I might not be able to be her knight on a white horse, but maybe I can be a better friend to her. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me, Harry," whispered the now crying girl, hugging him tightly. "There might be some hope for you yet."

There were three immediate results of Harry's conversation with Hermione. The most noticeable was that he stopped having nightmares almost immediately. Thankfully, just like after Harry had discovered the mirror, his dreams were once again filled with warm thoughts of Ginny. Usually they were images of them talking alone by the lake, or at his house. Occasionally they would be sitting with his parents, although in those dreams his parents never said anything, probably because Harry could not remember ever hearing their voices.

The second major change was Harry's relationship with Hermione. After their conversation, Harry tried to pay more attention to what he said around her, and to what she said around him. This meant he



was more aware when she was being serious and when she was teasing them. Surprisingly, Hermione had a better sense of humor than they had ever suspected. The only thing she never joked about was making sure their homework was done. Harry realized that Hermione was letting him see that side of her personality, and it touched him after their conversation and his realization of her feelings for him.

“I can’t be what she wants” he thought to himself, “but I can try to be the best friend possible to her.”

The final change was the one that shook Harry the most, even though it started out with the smallest of things. The change was in how he thought about Ginny. It started off when he received a letter from her a few days after his conversation with Hermione. Before his conversation with the young witch, Harry had always seemed to just blurt things out to her as he wrote. After his conversation, Harry paid more attention to what he was writing. He still told her everything that was going on, but now he would also talk about how he felt about those things. Ginny seemed to understand and appreciate what he was doing because her replies suddenly became just as expressive. Harry wondered if this was part of what the older students called “taking it to the next level,” whatever that meant. Of course, their increasing closeness did cause Harry a small amount of embarrassment.

“Hermione?” he said to her at breakfast, looking at Ginny’s most recent letter. “What does it mean when someone adds a bunch of X’s and O’s at the end of letter?”

The bushy haired young girl nearly choked on her juice before she looked up at him with a strange smile on her face.

“You all right, Hermione?” asked Neville as he and Ron arrived for breakfast.

“Someone sent Harry a letter with X’s and O’s on it,” she answered calmly, but the twinkle in her eyes could have put Dumbledore to shame.

Suddenly both boys were laughing uncontrollably, even Hermione giggling as Harry started to get a little annoyed. "Okay. Now that you've had your laugh at my expense, can someone please tell me what's so bloody funny?"

"Ignore them, Harry," Hermione said, finally getting her laughter under control. "They're just jealous."

Harry was still annoyed, and was now confused as well. "Jealous of what, Hermione?"

"When someone, hopefully a girl," snorted Neville, "sends you a letter signed with X's and O's, it means they are sending you..."

Ron cut in at that point, laughing so hard that he actually had tears in his eyes. "It means hugs and kisses, Harry. What daft bird is sending you a letter like that?"

Harry's temper had reached the boiling point as he glared at his friend. "Well let's think about that, shall we? Who writes to me almost every day, Ron? I mean who sends me letters almost every day, and who do I write to just as much?"

Ron looked confused for a moment before what Harry had asked finally seemed to sink in. Suddenly the red haired boy went completely white before suddenly blushing so furiously that Harry could almost feel the heat coming off his friend. As realization sank into Ron's mind, his friends watched a wide gamut of emotions play out across his face. The most obvious was shock, but there was also a momentary flash of anger. Then Ron closed his eyes and seemed to nod to himself, the anger vanishing from his face.

"I can't say I wasn't expecting it," he sighed. "You're all she talked about this summer after the two of you started writing. So you just make sure you protect her."

Now it was Harry's turn to be stunned, and from the look on their faces, so were Neville and Hermione. They all knew how protective

Ron was when it came to his sister, but here he was telling Harry that it was ok with him if Harry and Ginny got together. Harry could only sit there, staring at Ron in awe, wondering if he had underestimated his friend from the very beginning.

“I promise, Ron,” was all Harry could think to say. “I think we’ve got some time before we start worrying about protecting people. After all, we’re only eleven, mate.”

Ron shook his head, his face looking remarkably wise as he spoke. “We’ve faced trolls, you’ve almost died playing Quidditch, and there is a giant three-headed dog in the school. I’d say the time to protect each other is here, right now, Harry.”

As Harry lay in his bed that night writing to Ginny, he thought about how he felt about her and about Ron’s words. Hermione had been right. Ginny had been his first and last thought of each day for a long time now. If even Ron thought it was okay for Harry to “like” Ginny, then what was wrong with admitting it to himself? Finally, looking up at Ginny’s smiling picture, Harry smiled to himself.

“Does it really matter at this moment?” he thought. “For Christ’s sake, I’m only eleven, and she’s only ten. I’ve got plenty of time to figure it all out. No matter what though, she’s always going to be my very best friend, and I will protect her.”

The smile never left Harry’s face as he continued to write down a few last thoughts. When he was finally done, and before he signed it, he reached under his pillow to pull out Ginny’s most recent reply to him. Harry quickly skimmed over the letter and down to her signature before adding the same number of X’s and O’s to the end of his own letter. He followed that with his name and a small postscript.

“PS. I never knew what a signature like yours meant before, but I do now. I just want you to know that I mean each of mine in return. XO. Harry.”

If Harry had been worried about Ginny’s response to his letter, her reply quickly set his mind to ease. They both agreed to being a little

young for dating, but they also agreed that eventually they wanted to try it. Until that day, the two of them would remain the best of friends, no matter what. That thought alone kept a smile on Harry's face for the remainder of the week.

So it was not unexpected that several days later, during Quidditch practice, Harry found himself daydreaming about what it would be like to someday actually date Ginny. His understanding of what actually dating someone entailed was very vague, so most of his thoughts revolved around holding her hand and going to places like the museum or out to eat. Whatever the case, his flying was suffering and Wood did not seem at all happy about it as he watched Harry's erratic flying. To top it off, the Weasley twins had spent most of practice acting like complete fools rather than paying attention to what they were doing. The only real warning they had that something was wrong was the sound of a Quaffle hitting Fred in the chest, knocking him clean off his broom.

"Knock it off, you two!" roared Wood, his arms still outstretched from throwing the Quaffle at Fred. "Keep this up and we'll lose the match against Hufflepuff!"

"Like that would ever happen, Oliver," grunted Fred, picking himself up off the ground. "You're the best Keeper in the school, probably the best one this school has seen in years."

"And between Fred and I," continued George, "there's not a bludger yet that can get past us."

"Not to mention that Harry is the best Seeker we've ever seen," Fred added, climbing back on his broom. "Just don't tell Charlie we said that."

Harry could not help but blush after the compliment, but he had something to add as well. "Don't forget the girls, Wood," Harry said looking at the women of the team. "They're the best Chasers in school, and right pretty to boot."

Angelina, Katie, and Alicia each blushed at Harry's words, but smiled back at him with genuine looks of appreciation that he thought so highly of them. They each muttered thank you to him, before turning their attention back to their captain.

"It doesn't matter," sighed Wood, dragging a hand through his hair. "Professor McGonagall told me this morning that Snape is refereeing the next game."

Everyone instantly fell silent for a long moment before Angelina summed up their shock with two simple words.

"We're fucked."

Her words seemed to break through the wall of disbelief that had surrounded the team. Suddenly everyone was talking at once.

"What's that greasy haired plonker up to?" yelled Fred.

"He'll use every trick in the book to make sure we lose!" shouted George.

"He's really not that bad," Harry said calmly, earning him several shocked looks from his teammates.

"Are we talking about the same Snape?" Fred asked, looking closely at Harry.

"He hates Gryffindor!" ejaculated George.

"I'm serious," continued Harry. "Professor Snape just does what he has to in order to keep the Slytherins in line. He's always been nice to my friends and me."

"Then we're lucky you're on the team, Harry," Wood smiled. "Maybe he'll play fair with you around."

When finally made his way back up to Gryffindor Tower an hour later, he could not help but wonder why Snape had volunteered to referee

the match. Did the Potions Master suspect someone was going to try something at the match? That had to be it, because the team had been right, Professor Snape did not seem the type to care about Quidditch. Harry suddenly wanted very badly to talk to his Potions teacher. He decided that he would confront the man after his Potions class the next day.

Seeing his friends at their regular table in the common room, Harry hurried over to tell them all about Professor Snape's sudden interest in Quidditch. Grabbing a seat at the table, he wasted no time telling his friends everything. Ron and Neville looked confused, informing Harry that as far as they knew, Snape had never refereed a Quidditch match before. Hermione just looked worried as she listened to the boys talking.

"He must think someone is out to get you, Harry," she finally whispered.

"Quirrell," corrected Neville.

"Whatever," she said, sounding a bit frustrated. "I just want to know who he suspects."

"Quirrell," coughed Ron.

"Yes, yes," Hermione sighed. "I know your theory."

Harry cut her off at that point. "It's not a theory, Hermione. My instincts tell me that Quirrell can't be trusted and that he's up to something. I trust my instincts, and I would hope you trust me enough to do the same."

"Of course I trust you, Harry," Hermione said, looking rather ashamed of herself. "What do we do about this then?"

"We take precautions," smirked Harry.

All three friends listened intently as Harry explained his plan for the upcoming match. Each of them nodded to show they understood their

part in it. When they were done listening, Harry made his way up to his room to write Ginny about the day, but mostly he just wanted to sleep. Safe in the knowledge that his friends would be watching his back, Harry drifted off into dreamless sleep.

Unfortunately, if Harry thought the next day was going to be a peaceful one, he was sadly mistaken. It started with Peeves, the poltergeist, waking them up by dropping enormous water balloons on them the next morning. Not only was it a horrible way to wake up, but their beds were soaking wet and no amount of wand work would dry them. It seemed that the mischievous spirit had charmed the balloons to prevent them from being easily cleaned up. The day just went downhill from there.

By lunch it was obvious that Malfoy and his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, were out for blood, and Harry and his friends were their prey of choice. Every time Harry and his friends turned around that day, they were either being jinxed or tormented in some fashion by Malfoy or one of his followers. Potions class was a nightmare. After the third time that Harry's potion mysteriously exploded, so did the Potions Master.

"POTTER!" bellowed Professor Snape. "See me after class!"

Harry hung his head in apparent shame, but he was actually quite happy with the turn of events. Now he would have the perfect excuse to talk to Professor Snape without drawing too much attention from the Slytherin students. Of course, the bonus of the situation was that Malfoy, feeling that he had accomplished his goal of getting Harry in trouble, stopped jinxing Harry's cauldron so that Harry was able to scratch together a final potion that was at least partially acceptable.

"Let me guess," Professor Snape said calmly after the other students had left, "Draco and his flunkies giving you a hard time?"

Harry nodded emphatically. "All day, sir. I think he even talked Peeves into helping him this morning."

Snape nodded as he cleaned up several spilled potions left behind by the Slytherin students. "Peeves is rather easily bribed, and he is terrified of the Bloody Baron. Although, rumor has it, there is another spirit in this castle that he even more afraid of."

"Who, sir?"

"Well, and this is only a rumor, but Moaning Myrtle rather terrifies our resident poltergeist," Snape said with a rather vicious smirk. "She has been looking for someone to love for a very long time, and Peeves is something of a pet project of hers. He just can't help teasing her, and she just can't help but chase after him. I wonder what would happen if someone encouraged her in her pursuit of Peeves?"

Harry liked the idea, and grinned up at the Potions Master. "Whatever his reaction, he would be way too busy to bother students anymore."

"Exactly," smirked Snape.

"Sir? Can I ask you a question?" Harry asked, hoping to get the answers he really wanted to hear. "Why are you refereeing our game this weekend?"

Snape paused for a moment, taken by surprise by Harry's unexpected question. Harry watched as Snape seemed to consider what his answer should be. Finally, the Potions Master turned to Harry and motioned for the young boy to take a seat.

"You and I know that someone tried to kill you during your first Quidditch match," began the Potions professor. "If not for your own skill, and the fact that I was trying to counter the curse, you would be dead."

Harry nodded in agreement, but he was still annoyed with the other part of Snape's statement. "Sir, all I did was what everyone else did when we were first learning to fly our brooms. I did nothing special."



“That’s just a test, Harry,” Snape said quietly, “and one you passed with flying colors.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

The Potions professor chuckled softly, a sound that Harry had never expected to hear in his lifetime.

“I was worried when I first saw you that you would let your fame get the better of you,” smiled Snape. “Now that I have gotten a chance to know you, I can see that you are your mother’s son. However, and I never thought I would hear myself say this, but maybe this time you should be a little more like your father.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir,” Harry said, looking rather confused.

“Harry,” Snape said, looking into Harry’s eyes and taking on a hard expression. “Your father and I were never friends. In fact, I think it is safe to say that we loathed one another.”

Harry started to protest, but Snape held up his hand to stop him. “I admit that I was not exactly pleasant in my younger days. I will also admit that he had many good traits. Traits, Harry, that you share with him, and should be proud of.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

“What I’m getting at,” Snape continued, “is that your father, for all his faults, was a very talented wizard, just like you.”

Remembering his last letter from Sirius, and his uncle’s comment about how much Snape and his father had hated each other, Harry could not hold his tongue. “That really had to hurt, sir.”

Snape almost laughed at Harry’s comment. “You have no idea, but, to answer your original question, yes, I think that someone will try something at the match. I don’t think your mother would ever forgive me if I allowed something to happen to her son.”

Harry tried to get more out of the Potions professor but the man dismissed him a few moments later without another word about his worries about the upcoming game. Knowing it was a lost cause to try and pry the information out of him, Harry made his way up to the Gryffindor tower to tell the others about what Snape had said to him. He was still curious as to why Snape was so concerned about what Harry's mother would think of his actions. Harry could not help but wonder if his suspicions about Snape were true.

"I'm sure there was something between my mother and him," he thought as he gave the password to the Fat Lady.

Hermione and Ron were sitting at their usual table when Harry walked in. There was no sign of Neville, but Harry could fill him in later. Just as he sat down, he heard the portrait swing open again followed by the sound of several laughs, and a scream. When he turned around to look, even Harry fought a momentary urge to laugh, but he quickly lost the urge when he got a closer look at the figure that stumbled into the common room.

"NEVILLE!" screamed Hermione as they all ran toward their friend.

Neville was a mess. It was obvious that someone had hit him with a Leg Locker curse, but then they had beaten him until he was a bloody mess. Neville's face looked horrible, a trickle of blood running from his mouth and his eyes swollen almost completely closed. From the look of him, the wounded young boy must have bunny hopped up to the tower, using the last of his strength just to get there. Harry just barely reached him before Neville collapsed into Harry's arms.

Harry did not even need to think about what to do next. Picking Neville up in his arms, even though the unconscious boy was just as tall as he was, Harry ran out of the common room and towards the hospital wing. He moved so quickly that even with Neville's added weight, Ron and Hermione found it difficult to keep up with him.

"Got to move faster!" was Harry's only conscious thought as he ran past three very startled figures.

“Mr. Potter!” called Professor McGonagall, but Harry was already too far away to hear her.

“Was that Mr. Longbottom he was carrying?” Dumbledore asked, turning to follow Harry, and only just avoided being run over by Ron and Hermione.

By the time they all caught up to Harry, Madame Pomfrey was already busy examining Neville. She had immediately removed the Leg Locker curse, and was now trying to heal the worst of his wounds, including several broken ribs. Harry just stood watching from nearby, his back to the door as he waited to see if Neville would be all right. Much to everyone's surprise, he did not seem to be out of breath, or even sweating after running all the way to the hospital wing. Neither the teachers nor his friends could say the same, and it took them several moments to catch their breath before they could ask him what was going on.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore in a serious tone. “Would you care to explain why you were running through the hallways, disregarding your safety, as well as the safety of another student?”

“Headmaster,” Snape said, looking over at the bed with Neville's broken and bloody form on it.

“Safety,” hissed Harry, as he watched Madame Pomfrey work. “That's rich.”

“Harry,” Hermione said gently, trying to calm him.

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Potter?” Professor McGonagall asked, not having bothered to look over to where Neville was being treated for his injuries.

“Where were your concerns for safety when Neville was being beaten by students here in your school?” snapped Harry, pointing over to Neville before turning to stare coldly at the three teachers. “Better yet, where were you when he was forced to hop up to our common room for help. I saw plenty of people in the corridors on my

way here, but no one helped him or worried a bit about his safety! Are you telling me that no one saw he was injured and in need of help? Where was your bloody safety then!"

"Mr. Potter! You will not address faculty members in such a fashion!" McGonagall shouted, using her most intimidating voice on Harry, but he was unfazed.

"THE HELL I WON'T!" Harry shouted right back, causing the older woman to actually take a step back in shock.

"Harry," Dumbledore said coldly. "You will not yell at Professor McGonagall or me."

"Watch me," Harry snarled back, just as coldly.

Snape just watched the scene in front of him, his jaw hanging in shock as he listened to Harry tell both professors about what had been going on that day. All about the problems they had been having with the Slytherin students, and about Neville finally collapsing into Harry's arms. What truly shocked the Potions Master was the fact that Harry did not seem to be even remotely intimidated by Dumbledore's icy cold stare. In fact, both of them seemed to be doing their best to burn holes in the other with only their eyes.

"Make no mistake, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore snarled in a last ditch attempt to make Harry back down. "The safety of my students is my primary concern, and I do not take kindly to anyone insinuating that it is not."

Dumbledore's last hopes of regaining control of the situation faded as Harry laughed in his face before stepping aside and pointing to Neville's broken and bloody form. "Take a look at your handiwork then, old man. Then ask me if I should ever believe you again."

Everyone was stunned when Dumbledore, his face suddenly chalk white, turned and ran from the room, leaving an infuriated Harry Potter standing behind him. Only Professor McGonagall saw his face as the Headmaster ran from the room, and she would have sworn he

was crying. Whatever the case, Dumbledore ran from the room as if all the hounds of Hell were chasing after him. McGonagall watched him go, speechless that an eleven-year-old boy had stood up to, and won an argument against the "Great Albus Dumbledore."

"It was Draco," Snape whispered, "wasn't it?"

"I don't know yet," Harry said, his voice once again calm as he turned back to his injured friend. "Neville hasn't woken up yet, but if I had to guess then I would say yes."

"Was it really been that bad today, Harry?" asked the now pale and shaking Transfiguration teacher.

Harry just motioned back to where Neville was being treated by Madame Pomfrey. The matron was currently working on Neville's left hand, which seemed to have suffered several broken bones as well as his other injuries. When Harry turned to look at her, she could not look him in the eyes.

"Does it look like I'm exaggerating, Professor?" he asked in a deadly quiet voice.

Harry's words had shaken the faculty of the school badly, even the ones that had only heard about them second hand. He had shaken them all so badly that, much to Hermione's surprise, he was not punished in any way for his behavior towards the Headmaster and professors. In fact, he was actually given twenty house points for his quick thinking in getting Neville to the hospital ward so quickly. Harry ignored the points, considering them a bribe in an attempt to erase the guilt the professors felt regarding the condition Neville had been put in under their watch. Ron agreed with Harry.

Neville did not wake up until early Saturday morning, thanks in part to a powerful sleeping potion he had been given by the concerned matron. Harry thought it was probably a good idea considering Neville had still screamed a few times in his sleep while Madame Pomfrey had been magically setting his broken bones. For her part, Madame Pomfrey just kept telling Harry how grateful Neville should be that he

had a friend as quick thinking as Harry. When they stopped by to check on him before the Quidditch match, Neville was already awake and sitting up in bed.

“Who beat you up, Neville?” was the first question out of Ron’s mouth.

“It was Malfey and his buddies,” Neville answered quietly, not wanting Madame Pomfrey to hear. “Wanker snuck up on me when I was leaving potions. Hit me with a Leg Locker, then had his mates drag me into an empty classroom.”

“Report him, Neville!” insisted Hermione. “You have to tell Professor McGonagall.”

“No,” Neville replied flatly. “I’ll take care of this myself.”

“You can’t just go picking fights with other students, Neville,” Hermione said, looking a bit worried now.

Ron cut her off before she could say anything else. “And he can’t let Malfey walk all over him.”

“Malfoy is just a weakling,” Harry finally said. “He knows you are better than him, and he’s jealous. We’ll see to it that he pays though.”

Ron nodded in agreement. “We’ll make him pay ten times what he did to you, mate.”

“Boys!” huffed Hermione, but secretly she agreed with them. Malfoy did need to pay for what he had done.

Later that afternoon, after the shortest Quidditch match in over two hundred years, Harry was taking his broom to the school broom shed and thinking about the game. He had managed to catch the Snitch in less than a minute thanks to an odd bit of luck. While the Hufflepuff Seeker had streaked into the air when the Snitch had been released, Harry had only lifted up about ten meters. So it was with a bit of surprise when the Snitch dove down towards the ground and under

Professor Snape rather than streaking away into the blue sky. Harry had reacted instantly, yelling for Snape to move, which the stunned professor barely had time to do, before diving towards the Snitch and catching it. It all happened so quickly that the rest of the team kept playing for a minute before realizing the game was already over.

The Hufflepuff team had been devastated. Their captain could still be heard sobbing an hour later. Wood on the other hand was so happy that he was crying when they carried him off the pitch. Ron and Hermione were rather relieved when they did not have to act upon Harry's idea to stop anyone from hurting him during the game. Hermione had never been happy about the idea of setting fire to Quirrell, even though Ron had promised to put the fire out just as soon as Harry was safely on the ground. They had spent almost two hours, along with several other Gryffindor students, just flying around the pitch and enjoying the feeling of victory.

As he unlocked the shed, Harry caught a figure moving out of the corner of his eye. The figure was wearing a long hooded cloak, but Harry knew immediately who it was. He had watched the man strutting around the Potions dungeon often enough that it was easy to tell when Snape walked by, even when the man's face was covered. As Harry watched, the cloaked figure walked into the Forbidden forest. Not knowing exactly why, Harry suddenly decided to follow Snape.

Jumping on his broom, Harry quickly followed Snape. He wove his way through the upper branches of the trees following the shadowy figure below him until he finally heard a pair of voices talking below him. Harry, trying to be as quiet as possible, landed on a thick branch high above the two figures and tried to hear what they had to say.

"Students aren't supposed to know about the stone," Snape's voice said coldly from under the hood of his cloak.

The second cloaked figure looked smaller, almost like a woman, and it seemed to be trembling. It was not until he heard the person speaking that Harry realized it was a man, and a man that he knew.

"I d-don't know w-what you're talking ab-bout, S-severus."

“Quirrell,” Harry thought to himself with a mental hiss.

“Don’t give me that,” spat Snape. “I just want to know if you’ve figured out how to get past the oaf’s dog yet?”

“I s-swear, S-severus,” pleaded Quirrell. “I h-have n-no idea w-what y-you are t-talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” hissed Snape. “You don’t want me as your enemy, Quirrell. I know all about your little bit of hocus-pocus.”

Now Harry was interested but the wind picked that moment in time to start gusting. The sound of the wind through the trees drowned out anything else the two men said. Unfortunately, but the time the wind died down again, the two men had already turned to go their separate ways. Harry tried to follow Quirrell, but the Defense teacher seemed to vanish after only a few strides, leaving Harry alone in the dark forest. Realizing he had lost his chance, Harry flew back to the broom shed and thought about what he had heard.

He had thought Snape was a good person, but the Potions teacher had seemed different when talking to Quirrell. Sure, it was Quirrell and Harry did not like him either, but Snape had been threatening the stuttering Professor. Harry might not trust Quirrell, but he would never think of threatening the man. Still, Snape had done just that and it surprised Harry that he felt as if he should come to the Defense teacher’s... well... defense.

These thought kept repeating in Harry’s head as he made his way back to the castle. He was in his own little world as he walked up to Gryffindor tower, even ignoring the party that was taking place in the common room. It was not until he reached his room, and his own bed, that he admitted to himself that for the first time ever, he doubted his instincts. For once he wondered if he had gotten it backwards. Was Quirrell the innocent and Snape the manipulator out to get his hands on the Philosopher’s Stone? No one else trusted Snape, so why did



he? Harry had no good answer other than his instincts had always told him that Snape was on his side.

As he pulled back the red hangings from around his bed, Harry saw a small roll of parchment on his pillow. The parchment was tied close with a simple gold ribbon, which Harry quickly untied. Opening the scroll, Harry read the short little note.

“Harry,

Trust your instincts.

Trust Snape.

M. K.”

Harry smiled as he rolled up the parchment and tied the gold ribbon around it again. “All right, I’ll trust him for now. That’s one more answer you owe me, Mr. Knight.”

Ohai-yo,

SORRY! I'm a bad man, at least according to most of the women I date, but that's no excuse for making you wait so long for this new chapter. In my defense, I did finish writing this story, including the epilogue. Now it's all down to me typing up the last of it, which I'm working on this weekend. So, I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me, and if it helps, I might even post a second chapter tomorrow.

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. They put up with all my crazy ideas, and manage to polish all of them until they shine.

Now go read, and please review.

Chris

## Chapter 14: The Problem with Dragons

Ginny,

Well it's just like you thought it would be, several weeks have passed and not a word about anyone being punished for attacking Neville. The professors all act like it didn't happen, but the students know better. Thanks to your idea of talking with Fred and George, an older student always walks to class with us now. The only problem is when it is Percy's turn. Has he always been such a prat, or is that something new?

So far, the Easter break is turning out to be a complete nightmare. We have so much homework to do that we haven't been able to do anything fun for the holiday. Well we did tell Moaning Myrtle that Peeves thought she was cute, and she couldn't have been happier. I've never seen anyone moved that fast, alive or dead. Peeves keeps screaming at her that he doesn't like her, but Myrtle doesn't seem to be listening as she hasn't quit trying to catch him yet. I think, for once, I actually feel sorry for Peeves. Not much mind you, but a little at any rate. Other than that, we've been studying in the library most of the

time. In fact, Hermione currently thinks I'm writing an essay for Transfiguration, but I'll do that later.

I still haven't gotten a chance to talk to Professor Snape since I heard him talking to Quirrell in the forest. It's not like he's avoiding me or anything, I can just never find him when he's alone. Dumbledore always seems to show up when I get the chance to talk to Professor Snape, like he's watching us to make sure we can't talk. Maybe that's just nerves talking, but my instincts tell me that Dumbledore does NOT want me talking to Professor Snape.

Speaking of the old man, I know you said your parents really respect him, but he gives me the creeps. Anytime I'm in the Great Hall eating, he's always looking at me. Add that to the whole Professor Snape thing, and what I've told you about regarding his ideas concerning my living conditions, and I just don't trust him. Doesn't help that Ron is always teasing me about the way Dumbledore watches me. It's just really strange.

Enough of that. Did you ask your mom if you could come visit this summer? I know she said Ron and the twins could, but it would be nice if you could as well. If she gives you a hassle about it, let her know that Hermione and my cousin Tonks will be there as well. She graduated from Hogwarts this last summer and now she is training to be an Auror. Don't let that worry you though, she's really great. You've got to see her imitation of Sirius, it's just too funny.

Got to go for now. I think Hermione is on to me because she's glaring at me again.

XOXOXO

Harry.

"Tell Ginny I said hello," growled Hermione.

Harry smiled playfully at the glaring young woman before scribbling a hasty postscript to his letter saying exactly that. Hermione tried to stay angry at Harry, but she could not help but laugh when she noticed his complete lack of guilt about being caught writing to Ginny

instead of working on his homework. When he was done writing, he slipped the letter in his bag before turning and smiling roguishly at Hermione.

Ron watched all of this with a small grin on his face. He was not as thick as he acted, and he knew that Harry liked his sister. What he did not know was why Hermione was always teasing Harry about it. Sometimes he wondered if Hermione liked Harry, but recently that seemed to have changed as well. He might not know exactly what had happened, but in the last few weeks Harry and Hermione reminded him more of how he acted around Ginny, like a brother and sister. For some strange reason, that seemed to make Ron feel much better about the whole situation.

For the most part, he and Ginny had spent the better part of two years alone together while the rest of their brothers had been either off at school or working. The time alone together had brought the two siblings closer together, and made him a bit overprotective of her. The strange thing was, Harry now acted the exact same way where Hermione was concerned. Even stranger to Ron was the fact that the way Harry acted around Hermione made him feel better about his friend's relationship with his sister. In fact, if there was one person he knew would always protect his sister, it was Harry.

"He's going to marry her someday," Ron thought to himself. "So long as it isn't too soon, he's only eleven and she's just ten. There is plenty of time for that nonsense later on."

Any further thought about the situation were immediately pushed from his mind by the sound of someone dropping a book in the row behind the small group. Everyone turned around and watched as the hulking form of Hagrid stepped out from behind the shelves and towards them. Harry was a little surprised to see Hagrid in the library but decided not to say anything about it.

"Hagrid?" Neville whispered, looking a bit surprised. "What are you doing in the library?"

Hermione wasted no time kicking Neville's leg before trying to cover her friend's odd question. "What he means is that it is very good to see you, Hagrid."

"I know exactly what he means, Hermione," chuckled Hagrid, though he looked a bit nervous. "Not like I'm in here a lot, now is it? To answer your question, I was just looking for some light readin'."

Harry was not fooled for an instant. He had grown closer to Hagrid since his arrival at Hogwarts, and if there was one thing he knew it was that Hagrid was a lousy liar. There was also the fact that Hagrid seemed to be hiding a rather large book behind his back.

"What's wrong, Hagrid?" Harry asked, looking directly into the large man's eyes.

"Don't know what you mean, Harry," Hagrid replied, looking away quickly. "And what are you lot doing in the library on such a beautiful day?"

"We're trying to finish our homework," answered Hermione, not realizing that Hagrid was attempting to change the topic.

"Hagrid," Harry said calmly. "We need to talk to you. Will you be in your hut later?"

"Well actually, Harry," Hagrid began, but Harry cut him off.

"Good," Harry said calmly. "We'll be down to see you around three then."

Hagrid just nodded as he realized that Harry would not be taking no for an answer. Hanging his head, Hagrid silently waved to the four young friends before turning to leave. The old librarian, Madame Pince, followed after him picking up books he accidentally knocked off tables and shelves due to his great size.

"Ron," Harry whispered to his friend. "Go see what he was looking at."

“Right,” Ron answered with a nod before quietly slipping from the table and around the bookcase.

Hermione looked rather puzzled by Harry’s treatment of Hagrid. “What are you thinking, Harry?”

“Yeah,” added Neville. “What’s up?”

“You were right, Neville,” answered Harry. “Hagrid never comes to the library. Fred and George told me one time that Madame Pince always treats Hagrid badly when he’s in here, something about him knocking bookcases over, so he avoids the place at all cost.”

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something but Neville got there first. What’s that got to do with talking to Hagrid?”

“Because I want to know what’s going on,” sighed Harry. “I trust Hagrid completely, but if he’s up to something then I want to know what it is, before it comes back to bite us.”

“What makes you think it would affect us?” Hermione asked, finally understanding Harry’s concerns.

“Think about it, Hermione,” Harry said with another sigh. “What hasn’t affected us this year?”

“He’s got you there, Hermione,” Neville laughed.

Ron returned to the table just then took his seat again, tossing an old, worn book to Harry. Harry caught the book and opened it to see the title before sighing and handing the book to Neville. Neville almost laughed when he saw what the book was about, and then handed it to Hermione. For her part, Hermione just shook her head and began reading. None of them was really surprised, but Harry felt a lump in the pit of his stomach as he thought about what it meant.

“He’s got one, doesn’t he?” Neville said with a lopsided grin.

“Of course he does,” Harry replied, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Probably has it hidden in the bloody forest.”

Leaning back in his chair, Ron looked up at the ceiling. “It’s illegal, and he knows it.”

Hermione snorted as she looked up from the book in front of her. “That wouldn’t stop him. Hagrid just can’t seem to understand things like that. I mean, really, look at that three headed dog and tell me that dog’s not illegal as well.”

“True,” sighed Harry, putting his glasses back on.

One of the first things that Harry and his friends had learned about Hagrid was the man’s love of “interesting” and “misunderstood” creatures. The bigger and nastier the creature was, the better Hagrid liked them. Fang, Hagrid’s rather large dog, was just a small example of the groundkeeper’s love of large animals. Fluffy was just a more extreme example of Hagrid’s obsession. The fact that he saw no danger in creatures like that was a little disconcerting. At least in Fang’s case, the large dog was completely harmless, but a dragon would be another thing altogether.

When the four friends finally made their way down to Hagrid’s hut, Harry already had some idea of what they would find. Still, he reviewed his mental list of questions for Hagrid. Most he already knew the answers to, but thinking of the questions helped to keep his mind focused on the task at hand. It also would not hurt to have confirmation of some of the things they had already learned. They arrived at Hagrid’s hut, Fang already barking from inside. The four of them could not help but laugh since they knew that Fang was nothing but an overgrown puppy, and a coward to boot. As fierce as he sounded, a mouse was scarier than the large animal.

“Back, Fang!” Hagrid yelled as he opened the door. “Fool animal! You act like you don’t see this lot almost every weekend.”

It did no good though, because the instant they were all inside, Fang knocked Ron and Neville to the ground. Fang had them pinned to the floor with his massive paws and was happily bathing both of their faces with his long and extremely wet tongue. By the time Hagrid managed to pull his dog off the giggling boys, they both looked like they had just showered. Ron's hair was now sticking up to the left, while Neville's was sticking up to the right.

"Very cute," snickered Hermione. "That's a good look for both of you."

This comment earned her two identical, and very rude, hand gestures from the boys as they took their seats. Hagrid handed them both hand towels so they could dry themselves off. Meanwhile, Fang had his head resting in Harry's lap so that the young boy could scratch his ears. Harry really did not mind the attention from Fang, but cleaning the dog's drool off his robes would be a hassle.

"So," Hagrid said, pouring tea for all of them. "What did you lot want to see me about?"

Harry smiled up at his friend, almost feeling sorry for what he was about to ask. "Why in God's name is the Philosopher's stone being hidden here at Hogwarts? And please tell me there is something more than just Fluffy protecting it."

Harry imagined that the look on Hagrid's face had to be very much like the one he had worn when the troll pinned him against the wall on Halloween. The large man stood there, his eyes wide open in shock, pouring tea into an already overflowing mug. Hermione, ever the obsessive neat freak, took the kettle from Hagrid and put it back on the hearth. Grabbing a rag, she started to wipe up the spilt tea while Ron and Neville pushed Hagrid down into his chair. Harry watched all of this, and noticed Hermione motioning with her head towards the fireplace.

"I knew it," thought Harry, seeing a large egg amongst the logs in Hagrid's fireplace. "Can't it ever be simple?"



“H-how do you lot know about that?” Hagrid finally asked.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out once Ginny told us who Nicholas Flamel was,” Harry said, sipping his tea calmly.

Hagrid looked at Harry with a confused expression. “Who’s Ginny?”

“My sister,” said Ron proudly. “She’s a right smart one, she is. Got to remember and thank her for that. Saved us a lot of time in the library, she did.”

“Now we want to know why that stone was brought here,” continued Harry. “I know that Dumbledore and Flamel are partners, but why here and not Gringotts?”

“Well it’s safer here, isn’t it,” Hagrid answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Harry snorted at that comment. “This place is safer than the premier goblin bank in the world?”

“My brother Bill said that whoever tried to steal it from Gringotts didn’t even budge the door to the vault it was in,” added Ron.

Hagrid looked startled to see that Harry and his friends had figured out the secret of the Gringotts break in. “You lot figured that bit out as well.”

“We did,” Neville said with a wry grin. “That’s why it doesn’t make sense to bring the stone here, Hagrid. It’s too tempting to bring it here when it was perfectly safe where it was.”

“Now hold on,” Hagrid said heatedly. “No one could possibly get in here and take that stone. Not only would they have to get past Fluffy, but there are loads of enchantments blocking the way, including one done by Dumbledore himself.”

“So there are other things guarding the stone,” Harry thought as he took another sip of his tea. “That explains Professor Snape’s

comment to Quirrell about his bit of 'hocus-pocus'. I bet Quirrell was one of the people that helped to guard the stone, so he already knows how to get past one of the enchantments."

Harry thought quickly about what to say next. Hagrid was fiercely loyal to Dumbledore and Harry did not want to look like he was attacking the Headmaster. If he did that, Harry was positive that Hagrid would refuse to help them anymore. Harry did not need Hagrid becoming hostile towards him and his friends. There was only one way to get around that, and it was to change the topic quickly.

"Hagrid," he said in his most sincere sounding voice. "What's that in your fireplace?"

"Um... well... you see," Hagrid said, rushing over to put another log on the already roaring fire.

"I know what that is!" shouted Ron, having only just then seen the egg. "Where did you get it, Hagrid? They're really hard to find."

"And they're illegal," Neville added quietly.

"I won it in a game of cards last night at the pub," answered Hagrid. "Bloke seemed rather glad to be rid of it, too."

"You have to turn it in, Hagrid," Hermione said in her stern impression of McGonagall. "If you're caught with it, you'll be in ever so much trouble."

"Trouble doesn't begin to cover it," Neville said firmly. "If you are caught with an illegal dragon egg, it's time in Azkaban for sure."

Harry was about to say something when he suddenly looked closer at Hagrid. The giant man had turned the color of ash and begun to tremble violently. Harry jumped out of his seat and ran over to look at Hagrid, who was now looking at the egg in the fireplace as if he were terrified of it. It seemed that Harry's diversion had somehow turned into a crisis of its own.

“Hagrid?” Harry said, trying to get the man’s attention. “What’s wrong?”

When Hagrid finally turned to face the young wizard, Harry finally knew for the first time in his life what real terror looked like. Turning to his friends, Harry motioned for them to step outside so he could talk to the gigantic man on his own. They looked confused, especially Hermione, but they finally left.

“Okay,” Harry said once the door was closed. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t go back there,” whispered Hagrid, his eyes darting around the room as if expecting someone to jump out of the shadows.

“You can’t go back where?”

“Azkaban,” whispered Hagrid, his voice filled with terror. “I can’t go back there.”

Harry was stunned. He knew all about the wizard prison, but the thought that Hagrid had been a prisoner there shocked him to the core. Hagrid might be many things, but Harry could not imagine that he was a criminal. It just did not make sense.

“It was years ago,” Hagrid continued in the same terrified whisper. “It was all a mistake, but they didn’t want to let me go. Finally took Dumbledore vouching for me to make them release me.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry patted the large man’s hand to try and comfort him. It all made sense now. Hagrid was so loyal to Dumbledore because the old man had rescued him from Azkaban. From what Harry had heard, if Voldemort himself rescued Harry from that awful place, he would have sworn his loyalty to the crazed psychopath. Now he understood Hagrid’s terror and that even if he was not the cause of it, he was the trigger. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, Harry knew the solution.

Rushing to the door, Harry pulled it open and called to his friends. "Get in here. We've got work to do."

Within a matter of moments everyone was back inside and waiting expectantly for Harry to explain what was going on. Even Hagrid was watching the young Gryffindor. Harry barely paid any attention to the stares that followed him as he paced back and forth, his mind racing with ideas and solutions.

"Is your fireplace connected to the Floo Network?" Harry asked.

Hagrid nodded but then looked worriedly at Harry. "You can't send the egg anywhere that way, it would get lost. You might hurt the wee baby."

"I didn't plan on sending it through the Floo, Hagrid," Harry said calmly, trying not to laugh at the idea of calling a dragon a "wee baby." "Hermione. Can you conjure a flame hot enough to keep the egg warm while we use the fireplace?"

"I think so, Harry," she said calmly, but her eyes betrayed the fact that she was a little nervous. "I'll need something to conjure it in that won't burn though."

Neville grabbed a large garden spade from beside Hagrid's door and handed it to Harry. "This should do the trick, and you'll need it to take the egg out of the fire anyway."

"Good idea, Neville," said Harry as he handed the spade to Hagrid. "You'll have to hold the egg for Hermione while she keeps it warm."

Hagrid nodded before gently scooping the large egg out of the fire. Hermione wasted no time, drawing her wand and casting the same spell on the spade that she had used to keep them warm before Harry's first Quidditch match. This was a much hotter version of that spell and Harry could tell it was taking all of her concentration to keep the fire burning.

“What do you want us to do, Harry?” asked Ron, Neville standing right beside him.

“Neville,” Harry said, turning towards the dark haired boy. “Keep an eye on Hermione. If she starts looking tired, take over for her. Tell him what he needs to know, Hermione.”

As Hermione started explaining the spell to Neville, Harry turned to look at Ron. “You get to be the messenger boy, mate. I need you to get in touch with your brother Charlie in Romania. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure thing, Harry,” Ron said with a wide grin, understanding what Harry had in mind. “Where’s your Floo powder, Hagrid?”

“Pink jar on the mantle,” answered Hagrid, in awe at how quickly the four children had taken control of the situation.

With a wide grin, Ron grabbed the small pink jar. Within moments, the youngest Weasley boy had his head buried in the green fire. They were in luck. Charlie was home and Ron quickly explained the situation to his older brother. Hagrid watched all of this with a surprised look on his face. It amazed him how Harry had fallen into the role of leader so easily and how well his friends followed his instructions. By the time Ron pulled his head out of the fire, Hagrid understood exactly why Harry was so special.

“Ok, Hagrid,” Ron said with a wide grin on his soot covered face. “Charlie is going to contact a friend of his at the Ministry and inform them that he requested your help in retrieving the egg from a poacher. If anyone asks you, he called you last night and you went to confront the poacher, eventually tricking him into giving you the egg.”

“But people saw me playing cards with ‘im,” protested Hagrid.

“Well that’s one way of tricking him into giving you the egg,” grinned Harry.

“Anyway,” continued Ron, “Charlie’s friend will probably be around tomorrow to collect the egg. She’ll be made aware that you are taking steps to make sure the egg hatches properly, so no worries there.”

“So, I won’t be in any trouble?” asked Hagrid in disbelief.

“Nope,” grinned Ron. “You were acting on behalf of an employee of the Romanian Dragon Preserve in order to return the egg to them. My dad may come out with Charlie’s friend to help you, if you need it.”

Harry felt rather good about the outcome of the situation, and was delighted to be able to help Hagrid. Just as soon as his ribs healed from the hug Hagrid had given him, Harry was sure things would return to normal for the gamekeeper. They were all a little worse for wear after the happily crying man hugged them, but a little discomfort was worth dispelling Hagrid’s fears concerning Azkaban.

When they finally took their leave of Hagrid’s hut, Hermione had fallen asleep. Keeping her spell burning as hot as they needed had exhausted the young witch, who had refused Neville’s offers to help her. Much to everyone’s surprise, Ron asked their assistance in lifting Hermione on to his back so he could carry her back up to the school. Ron blushed for a moment or two, but Harry saw the determined look in his friend’s eyes. As they walked up to the castle, Hagrid waving happily at them and promising them his help if they ever needed it, the three boys and sleeping girl made their way back to their common room.

Harry had debated asking Hagrid for more details concerning the protection around the Philosopher’s stone, but decided against it. Hagrid seemed to want to spend time with his precious dragon egg before it was picked up by Charlie’s friend. It still seemed mental that Hagrid would be so attached to the egg. Maybe it had something to do with Hagrid being lonely, or maybe he really was just mental. In either case, Harry was not about to ruin his friend’s last night with the egg with questions about things he did not want to talk about.

Finally arriving at Gryffindor tower, Harry saw that Ron was sweating heavily from carrying Hermione. Harry had offered to take her from

him, but Ron had refused the offer. He also noticed that there was a small smile on the sleeping girl's face as she rested her head on his shoulders. Watching his friends, Harry wondered exactly what Hermione was dreaming about, and why Ron looked so determined not to fail her.

Once there were inside the common room, which was thankfully empty at the moment, Ron carried his sleeping passenger over to the largest of the couches in the room. With a slightly surprising gentleness, Ron kneeled with his back to the couch, letting Hermione fall back on to the couch without waking her. Even more surprising was when the red haired boy continued to slide down onto the floor, still between her thighs. He looked completely exhausted, and when the still sleeping Hermione suddenly reached up and started to stroke Ron's hair, he was asleep in second.

Harry and Neville watched the strangely intimate an yet innocent moment with smiles on their faces. They watched as Ron laid his head against Hermione's thigh as she ran her fingers through his hair. Both had contented smiles on their sleeping faces, and Harry did not have the heart to wake them. Harry just watched for a moment, before turning to Neville.

"We never say a word about this," he whispered to Neville.

"Agreed," Neville whispered. "I just wish I had a camera. This would make great blackmail material."

"Too right it would," Harry agreed with a soft chuckle.

Neville ran down to the Great Hall to see about getting them some sandwiches while Harry stayed in the common room to guard his sleeping friends. Fortunately for him, no one bothered them, and since the couch was facing away from the portrait hole, no one could see where Ron was currently sleeping. Harry took a seat in one of the nearby chairs and watched his friends as they slept. Hermione continued to play with Ron's hair as she slept, and Ron's face was still covered in a peaceful smile. It was a tender and sweet sight that filled Harry with a sense of protectiveness concerning his friends.

What was strange was that he was also a bit jealous of them, but he pushed that feeling aside forcefully.

Neville returned after about a quarter of an hour with several sandwiches. Just as Harry looked over at the dark haired boy, he heard a startled gasp and realized that Hermione must have woken up. Turning back to her, Harry tried very hard to stifle his laughter at the sight of her blushing face. It did not help that for all her apparent embarrassment, Hermione was still playing with Ron's hair.

Harry decided it was best if he got Hermione's attention before she either fainted or started screaming. As Neville approached from behind Hermione, Harry made quick eye contact with the young man and shook his head. Neville understood and stopped, waiting for Harry's signal that everything was all right. That done, Harry coughed quietly to get Hermione's attention. She instantly looked up at him, her face even redder now.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about," Harry whispered just loud enough for her to hear him. "He carried you up here on his back all the way from Hagrid's hut. Once he put you down, he fell asleep. I doubt he even realized where he was at when he did. No one but Neville and I have seen you two like this, and we will never tell anyone. I stayed to watch over you while Neville went to get us some food."

He said all of this quietly, and firmly, so that she would understand that everything was okay. She nodded her head before looking down at the sleeping boy between her thighs. Harry thought it was funny that even now Hermione was still playing with Ron's hair. When she looked up at Harry, Hermione looked calmer and smiled at him.

That lasted for only a second though, as Ron picked just that moment to turn his head slightly, brushing his lips across Hermione's bare thighs. Hermione let out a sound that reminded Harry of a mouse for some reason, and he watched as her face turned even redder than before.



“Time to wake him up, I think,” Harry whispered again, watching Hermione nod vigorously at his suggestion. “Whatever you do, don’t move until he’s awake.”

Hermione nodded again and tried to remain perfectly still. Harry had to smile though when he looked down at her hand which caused her to look down at it as well. She looked confused for a moment, not remembering when she had started playing with Ron’s hair, or why she was still doing it. Harry just kept smiling when she slowly pulled her hand away from Ron’s head with a sad and wistful look on her face, her cheeks slightly red. He filed the image away for use at some point in the future.

“Hungry, Ron?” Harry asked suddenly.

Neville almost laughed as he watched his red haired friend sit straight up. Hermione quickly pulled her skirt down, clamping her legs together, her ears a dark crimson that Neville could see right through her hair. When Ron stood up, she quickly scooted over to the far end of the couch so that he would not realize where he had been sleeping just moments before. Harry chuckled softly as Neville handed the eternally hungry boy a large sandwich, which Ron wolfed down as if he had not eaten in weeks.

The four friends sat talking until it was finally time to make their way up to their beds. Ron complained that he was not that tired. In fact, according to him, his earlier sleep was the best that he could ever remember having. Of course, Hermione turned a bright red at hearing Ron’s statement, but Harry also noticed that her hand seemed to be twitching, almost reaching out to touch Ron’s shoulder when he said it. Harry just smiled and watched and Ron and Neville made their way up to the first year boys’ dorm.

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione said softly.

Harry nodded and smiled back at her. “You’re welcome, Hermione. I would never let you two get hurt. I do have one question.”

“Yes?” she asked, looking at him seriously.

With a perfectly straight face, Harry looked the young girl in the face. "Teddy bears?"

He could not help but laugh as Hermione's face turned the brightest shade of red that he had seen from her so far. Her hands instantly flew to her skirt, clamping it against her legs.

"Harry!" she hissed, her face once again turning red. "How could you look?"

"I didn't do it on purpose," he chuckled, "but now you can consider us even for you telling Ron and Neville about the X's and O's. Now I know what to get you for your birthday, a nice big teddy bear."

"Harry Potter," growled the young witch. "If I ever get something like that from you, I will personally make you regret that you were ever born!"

"Okay. Okay," he said with a wide grin. "I promise that I will never give you anything with a teddy bear on it."

"Doesn't mean Ron won't though," he thought as Hermione walked up the stairs to the girls' dorm room. "Especially if I keep suggesting it to him over the summer."

Thinking his day could not be any more surprising, Harry found Ron still wide awake when he entered the first year boys' dorm. The youngest Weasley boy was sitting on the edge of his bed staring off into space. It was only after Harry walked over to his bed and started getting ready for some well-earned sleep that Ron finally said something.

"It's really odd, Harry," Ron said in a soft voice. "I feel like I'm missing something. After I woke up downstairs, I just keep thinking that there is something I need but I can't figure out what it is. Does that make sense?"

“I know exactly what you mean, Ron,” smiled Harry. “Don’t worry about it for now. I’m sure in time you’ll figure out what it is. Trust me.”

“Okay, Harry,” replied Ron as he slipped under his covers.

The next day found the four friends spending most of their time down at Hagrid’s hut. Mr. Weasley had arrived early that morning with a rather pretty blonde woman. It turned out that the woman was Charlie’s friend at the Ministry, and she was the one who would be taking possession of the “rescued” dragon egg. Placing the egg in a special bag, enchanted to keep the egg perfectly safe and warm, the young woman could be heard saying that she was personally going to deliver the egg to Charlie. A few minutes later, after hugging Mr. Weasley and waving to Ron, she walked off towards the main gates of the school.

“Who exactly was that girl, Ron?” asked Hermione in a tone so cold that Harry shivered.

Ron missed her tone completely though, and smiled back at her. “That’s Lucy Pevensie, Charlie’s old girlfriend. They dated before he moved to Romania. They’re still really good friends, and mum hopes she’ll convince Charlie to move back home.”

“That name seems really familiar,” mused Harry, not being able to place where he had heard it before.

“No idea, mate,” continued Ron. “She’s a real good match for Charlie though, and I used to love listening to her tell stories about her grandmother when she came to visit. Pure fantasy, but great fun all the same, especially the bits about the lion.”

Harry stopped dead in his tracks and watched the blonde girl as she walked away. He slowly turned to look at Hermione, who with her voracious reading habits had also recognized the young girl’s name. Hermione looked as surprised as Harry did, but neither got a chance to say anything when Ron called out to his father.

Mr. Weasley was just as nice as Harry remembered him being. Ron made the introductions quickly, and Neville took an instant liking to the older Weasley. With Ron's introduction of Hermione as the "smartest witch in our year," the Weasley patriarch was soon making a good impression on her as well. By the time Mr. Weasley had to leave, Hermione had already explained the concept of a toilet plunger and a hula-hoop to the ever curious man. Harry and the others just laughed as she patiently explained the most mundane Muggle items to Mr. Weasley before they said their farewells.

For Harry and his friends, it was a very enjoyable day. After Mr. Weasley left, they checked on Hagrid to make sure he was doing all right. It had been hard on the gamekeeper to turn over the dragon egg, but they hoped he knew it was for the best. To their surprise, rather than finding Hagrid depressed and mourning the loss, he was rather pleased to announce that Miss Pevensie had suggested he visit the Romanian Dragon Preserve that summer to check up on the hatchling. Harry could not help but breathe a little easier after seeing the happy expression on his large friend's face. Now they could put their dragon troubles behind them.

So, after such a nice a peaceful day, it came as something of a horrible surprise when four hooded figures jumped out from behind several trees and began casting spells at Harry and his friends. One minute the friends were laughing, and the next moment they were fighting. Wands snapped out, but what Harry did surprised everyone, including his attackers. With a speed that seemed more magical than natural, Harry closed the distance between himself and the largest of the four attackers. Never even bothering to draw his wand, Harry jumped on the larger figure and began raining punches down upon the hooded face of his attacker.

Years of fighting bullies back home had taught Harry many things, including the value of running away if the opportunity arose. It had also taught him that although fighting never proved anything, winning tended to mean you were not the one visiting the nurse's office when the fight was over. Harry's friends watched in shock, as he dodged not one, but three beams of brightly colored energy as he continued to pummel the larger boy until he collapsed under the blows.

Meanwhile, the other three attackers began firing spells at Ron and the others.

“HARRY!” yelled Ron.

Harry turned from the now bleeding and crying form of Goyle, lying on the ground at Harry’s feet, to see a sight that terrified him more than anything ever had before. Laying on the ground behind his other two friends, a bright red spot of blood on her face, lay Hermione. The sight of his friend laying there on the ground enraged Harry in a way that nothing ever had before. Without thinking, Harry turned back to his attackers and began kicking Goyle until the boy passed out.

The smallest of the four attackers, a young girl from the sounds of her panicked screams, turned and ran for the school when Neville and Ron dropped their wands and resorted to their fists. Ron, just as furious as Harry, ripped the hood off his attacker and revealed the face of Crabbe. If the larger Slytherin boy thought he had an advantage in size, he was quickly proven wrong when Ron knocked him off his feet with one blow to the face. There was a gush of blood from Crabbe’s nose as the large boy collapsed.

Neville, as luck would have it, got his chance for revenge against Draco Malfoy. Malfoy had tried to run when he realized that things were not going as planned, but Neville was quicker. Grabbing Malfoy by his shoulder, Neville spun the pale-skinned Slytherin around and right into the path of the Gryffindor’s fist. The sound Neville’s fist made when it made contact with Malfoy’s jaw as rather like the sound of someone Apparating, and Harry was tempted to look over his shoulder to make sure that no one was there. As Malfoy’s eyes rolled up into his head, Harry knew the fight was over and it was time to see to Hermione.

Before he could reach her, Harry watched Ron scoop the unconscious girl up in his arms. Being as gentle as he could, Ron took off for the hospital wing as fast as he could. In what seemed like a spectacular case of déjà vu, they once again ran past several stunned looking teachers, including Minerva McGonagall.

“Oh dear God,” she prayed silently. “Please, not again.”

Following after the three running boys, Professor McGonagall arrived at the hospital wing only moments after they did. There was a great deal of shouting as Ron laid Hermione on one of the beds and Madame Pomfrey began examining the young girl. Pushing the three boys back, the matron pulled the privacy curtain around her patient, leaving the three boys looking pale and worried.

“What happened to Miss Granger, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked, trying to draw the attention of the three boys.

“Malfoy and his flunkies attacked us as we were walking back to the castle from Hagrid’s hut,” Harry answered, not bothering to turn to face her.

“There were four of them,” added Ron. “They had their hoods pulled up to hide their faces. They started attacking and Hermione got hit by something.”

“One of them, a girl I think, ran off when we started fighting back,” Neville said coldly. “We took care of the other three though.”

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Longbottom?” asked the now worried Transfiguration teacher.

“He means,” Harry said coldly, “that we beat them until they stopped trying to fight back. Then we brought Hermione here.”

“So you admit to injuring other students?” asked the voice of Albus Dumbledore from the doorway.

Harry looked over at the Headmaster as he walked into the room. Behind him floated the three bodies of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. The three Slytherins were still unconscious as Dumbledore waved his hand and they each settled down on an empty bed.

“Yes, Headmaster,” Harry answered coldly. “I fully admit that we were attacked by Malfoy and his friends, including a young girl that

ran away. We defended ourselves after they attacked us, and did what needed to be done in order to end the fight quickly.”

Dumbledore looked livid as he turned back to face Harry. “You call this defending yourselves? Mr. Malfoy’s jaw is broken and Mr. Goyle has multiple broken ribs. As for Mr. Crabbe, his nose is broken and his left eye is completely swollen shut in addition to a concussion.”

“Headmaster,” interrupted Harry. “After they injured Hermione, we did what we had to in order to stop the fight quickly.”

“ By savagely beating three of your fellow students!” roared Dumbledore. “I’ve heard more than enough! One hundred points will be deducted from Gryffindor for each of you, and you will each receive a detention!”

Professor McGonagall had been listening quietly until she heard the Headmaster’s punishment for the Gryffindors. “Albus! Isn’t that a little extreme given the circumstances? They were defending themselves from an unprovoked attack.”

Dumbledore did not even bother to answer the Deputy Headmistress. Instead, he turned and left the room before anyone else could say a word. Minerva McGonagall had never been so outraged in her entire life. She could not help but wonder where the man she had always respected had gone to, and who this new person was that had taken his place.

“Misters Potter, Longbottom, and Weasley,” the Head of Gryffindor house said quietly as she turned back to look at her students.

“Yes, Professor?” they each replied through gritted teeth.

“Fifty points to each of you for quick thinking in getting Miss Granger here after she was attacked,” McGonagall said quietly, but firmly. “Also, twenty-five point to each of you for your help in assisting our groundskeeper in his duty to help the Ministry to retrieve that dragon egg.”

Harry could not help the smile that suddenly appeared on his face as McGonagall handed out the points. She had not completely canceled out Dumbledore's overzealous punishment, but it was better than nothing.

"You three did rather severely beat Mr. Malfoy and his friends," she continued, "so I cannot completely excuse your actions. However, I believe that the circumstances were ones in which you could not be expected to just let yourselves be attacked. Miss Granger's injuries may have also clouded your judgment in this matter."

"Thank you, Professor," the three boys chorused.

"Don't thank me yet," McGonagall said with a scowl. "There is still no acceptable excuse for fighting, but that goes for Mr. Malfoy and his fellow Slytherin students. I will be speaking to Professor Snape about this incident and I will see to it that Mr. Malfoy and friends all receive the same punishment as you three. If you have any idea who the fourth person was who attacked you, I will make sure that they are also punished."

"We just know it was a girl, Professor," supplied Neville. "Fairly short, too, but that could be any of the first year Slytherin girls."

McGonagall nodded and looked over at the curtains around Hermione's bed. Then looking over at the three Slytherin students, she waved her wand to draw the curtains around their beds as well, sealing them as well so the boys would not cause more trouble when they awoke. Harry had said that Albus was lax in his duties to protect the students, and sadly, here was the proof of those accusations.

"I just hope we find a solution before someone dies," thought the professor as she took a seat to wait with the three young men from her house.



Ohai-yo,

Once again, I have to apologize. I had fully intended to post the new chapter sooner than this, but it seems I have gremlins plaguing these final chapters. Between typists that can't type, typists that loose entire chapters, and document formatting issues... well it's just been a really long two weeks.

On the bright side, the writing is all done, including the epilogue. I am personally typing up the last chapter and the epilogue this weekend, and then it is all off to my betas. Hopefully you'll have the last three chapters very soon, and I hope you will like them as much as I do.

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. Without them, this just would not be as good as it is.

Now go read, and please review.

Chris

PS. I want to thank everyone that has reviewed so far, and everyone that has read my story. At well over 30,000 hits, this has become one of my most read stories ever. I may not have as many hits as some authors, but I think it all comes down to quality versus quantity. What I am trying to say is, you are all the best and I really enjoy writing for you. :)

## Chapter 15: Into the Forest

Sirius,

Honestly? No, I don't think we overreacted. I mean it. We were attacked by four hooded figures who started throwing spells before we could defend ourselves. They hit Hermione with a Reductor curse. We just got lucky that it hadn't been cast properly or she could have died. What did you expect us to do after that?

Be honest, after everything you've told me about your days at Hogwarts, can you honestly tell me that you would have done anything differently? Would Remus have stood by as one of you was hurt? Would my dad? I wish there had been another way, and maybe if I knew a bit more magic there would have been, but there wasn't.

As it is, there have been no further incidents. Malfoy and his friends, though I hate to call them that, received the same punishment that we did. I think it's a bit unfair considering they were trying to kill us, but Dumbledore refused to expel them after Madame Pomfrey told him what the curse was. His excuse was that they had already been punished and it was too late to change it. A bunch of rubbish if you ask me, but Professor McGonagall says there is nothing she can do until she has more evidence. Same goes for the fourth person that attacked us, no one seems to know who it was, and the Headmaster does not seem overly concerned with figuring it out.

Hermione is fine now, and says thank you for being so concerned about her. Fortunately, the spell just shook her up and Madame Pomfrey was able to fix her up fairly quickly. It was still really scary and I hate to think about what could have happened if the person casting that spell had got it right. Thank God that Malfoy and his mates are thick as rocks.

Dumbledore is still acting strangely. One moment he is acting like everyone's favorite grandfather, and then suddenly he's in a huff again. Yesterday Neville overheard Quirrell in one of the classrooms, he was obviously upset about something, but by the time Neville got close enough to hear who he was talking to, Dumbledore showed up and dragged him away. The old man didn't explain why he was so upset about it, and Neville said he seemed more concerned with where I was rather than anything else. Strange.

Ginny finally sent her answer about this summer. Her mom should be owling you soon about Ginny and her brothers coming to visit this summer. Hermione says her parents will be calling as well, so try not to scare them by acting strange on the telephone. They don't need you giving them the willies while they try to adjust to their daughter being a witch.

Don't forget to tell Tonks that she will be sharing a room with the girls this summer. We don't need a repeat of last summer, even though I do still think she planned for Remus to walk in on her like that. I still get chuckle out of how badly the old wolf was blushing after that.

Speaking of the old wolf. I promise I will not say anything to my friends about his furry little problem, but I think you should at least tell their parents. I know you said that Mr. Weasley and his wife already know, but what about Hermione's parents? Should I tell her and let her decide what to tell her parents? Let me know soon, as we're running out of time.

I've got to go now. We're to serve our detentions tonight at 11:00 and I really need a nap before then. Hopefully it won't be cleaning the bathrooms with Filch.

Take care. I miss you and Remus.

Harry

PS. Do you know how to reach Mr. Knight? I haven't heard from him in a while and Hedwig can't seem to find him to deliver a letter to him. H.

Harry glanced at his watch and sighed before rolling up the letter to Sirius. Why they had to serve detention in the middle of the night was beyond him. If they had told him about it earlier he would not have stayed up so late working on homework the previous night. Instead, Professor McGonagall had notified them that morning that they would be serving detention that night. Now he only had a little over an hour before his detention began.

"This has to be God's way of punishing me for something," sighed Harry as he looked for the wax he needed to seal his letter. "I'm not sure what it's punishment for... although it could be for trying to remove Goyle's bits with my shoe."

Quickly sealing the scroll of parchment, Harry tucked the letter to Sirius in his robes before climbing into bed. Within moments he was asleep, and his mind at peace. Soon after that he had a shy smile on

his face as he began to dream of Ginny and an afternoon spent flying with her.

That was how Ron found his friend several minutes later. It was rare to see Harry smile since the attack by Malfoy and his thugs. Harry had seemed to grow older after the attack, although he had always been rather mature for his age. Now Harry seemed a bit colder than he had before. Still, Ron and the others did their best to be like Harry. There was just something about his maturity and confidence that they all wanted to emulate, even if they did not always understand why.

Ron smiled over at his sleeping friend, and silently laughed at himself. If Ron was really honest with himself, then he was still really immature, but he was trying. His mother and father had raised all of their children to be honest with themselves, even if they did not want to be all the time. The fact was, Ron was a little jealous of Harry's fame. That was one of the things that he was trying to get past, and further proof that he was not as mature as he wanted to be. It helped that Ron could see Harry trying to shun his fame, proving that Harry was the better man for it.

"Ginny says that he didn't even know he was famous before she met him," thought Ron as he settled back onto his bed. "He spent his whole life being bullied, and now he spends all of his time standing up against bullies and helping other people."

It was hard for Ron to imagine Harry ever being bullied by anyone. After all, Harry had stood up to Albus Dumbledore and anyone that could do that was incredibly brave in Ron's opinion. That was the type of person Ron wanted to be, so thinking about Harry being bullied was just hard for him to grasp. As he drifted off to sleep, Ron wondered if someday he could be as brave as Harry.

A little over an hour later, Ron woke up to find Hermione standing over him. "Wake up, Ronald!"

"S'not fair," mumbled Ron as he sat up. "How come you can come in here but we can't go in your room?"

“Because girls are more trustworthy than boys,” Hermione answered smugly. “It says so in ‘Hogwarts: A History.’”

“Are we going to have to hear about that bloody book for the next seven years?” Neville muttered, also standing up from where he had been sleeping on his bed.

Harry shrugged and muttered under his breath to Neville. “Leave her be. If it keeps her happy, don’t complain.”

“Did you say something, Harry?” Hermione asked with a frown.

“He said unless we’re snappy, we’ll be late for detention and that would be a pain,” answered Neville, his face a perfect mask of innocence.

“Of course he did,” replied Hermione, not fooled for an instant. “Now, all three of you had better hurry. Your detention starts in fifteen minutes.”

The three boys wasted no time in running out of the room and down the staircase, leaving Hermione laughing in their wake. Sitting down on Ron’s bed, Hermione tried to stop laughing as she noticed how warm the mattress was under her. Lost in her thoughts, it was a few moments before Seamus finally got her attention by clearing his throat.

“You do know this is the boys’ dorm room,” he said groggily. “We’re trying to sleep here, you know?”

Harry and the other two boys barely made it down to the school entrance in time. They had just arrived when they saw Argus Filch enter from the dungeons, Draco Malfoy following glumly behind him. Harry ignored the Slytherin boy, but Ron and Neville looked outraged at the mere sight of him. For his part, Malfoy ignored the three Gryffindor students, trying his best to look superior to them.

“Follow me,” growled Filch with a sneer that probably made Malfoy jealous.

Stalking out through the main doors, Filch began ranting about how horrible their detention would be. Harry doubted very much if they had ever allowed students to be whipped at the school as Filch claimed, but the others looked terrified by the idea. Even Malfoy seemed paler than usual, flinching each time Filch went into detail about torturing students. Harry just ignored all of this and looked around trying to figure out where they were going. It was with a feeling of relief when he finally realized where Filch was leading them.

“Think you’ll be enjoying yourself, do you, boy?” Filch snarled, looking at Harry. “You’ll be changing your mind quickly once you’ve stepped foot into the forest.”

“The forest!” shrieked Malfoy. “There’s no way I’m going in there! It’s dangerous!”

“You’ll go, and that’s that,” Hagrid said firmly as he met Filch and the students. “It’s either that or you can go pack your bags and go home.”

“You can’t do that!” Malfoy shrieked again. “When my father hears about this he’ll...”

“He’ll tell you to shut your mouth,” Hagrid laughed. “He knows how we do things here after all the times he spent in detention with me. So, you’ll either do what I tell you, or you’ll be heading home in the morning. I wonder how your father would like the idea of his son being kicked out of Hogwarts.”

Malfoy went pale at the thought of his father’s reaction to that news. Clamping his mouth shut, the pale boy bowed his head in defeat and waited for his punishment to begin. The darker part of Harry’s personality wanted to laugh at Malfoy, but he was too nervous to even think about laughter at the moment. In fact, for the first time since meeting Malfoy, Harry completely agreed with him concerning his fear of the forest.

Other than the time Harry had followed Professor Snape in to the forest, Hagrid's hut was the closest he had ever been to the mysterious woods. The difference then had been the fact that he had known he could just fly out of the woods then, but now he was going in on foot. Listening to Malfoy and the obvious fear in the boy's voice, Harry realized just how afraid of the woods he was. It now seemed to Harry as if the woods were alive, and to make matters worse, he felt that they were watching him. For the first time since battling the troll, Harry was afraid, and from the look on his friends' faces, so were they.

"We couldn't do this during the day?" Harry thought as he stared at the edge of the forest. "Why are we going in there at night?"

Before he could ask, Hagrid picked up his large crossbow and motioned for the four boys to follow him. Harry was too frightened to even notice as Filch made several more dire predictions regarding their health when he returned for them at dawn. All Harry could think of at that moment were the shadowy trees in front of him and how with each step they were growing closer. Something was wrong about all of this, and Harry felt a sense of dread fill his stomach.

"You all need to be casting Lumos," Hagrid said lightly, sounding to all the world as if they were just going on a nighttime stroll. "It's mighty dark in these woods."

"What are we doing in here, Hagrid?" asked Neville as soon as his wand was lit. "Professor Dumbledore said it was off limits."

"It is unless you are with me or Fang," smiled the gigantic man. "Nothing in these woods will hurt you if you are with me or Fang. Problem is, something in here is hunting unicorns. I found one dead last week, and now there's another one injured in here. We need to find it and heal it if we can. If we can't..."

Hagrid's voice trailed off in to silence as he held his crossbow up for all the boys to see. "I don't like the idea of killin' a unicorn, seeing as how they are so innocent, but we just might not have a choice."

“What could be going after unicorns though?” Ron asked, his voice sounding shaky. “You think it could be werewolves?”

Harry answered even before Hagrid could. “It’s the wrong time of the month for werewolves, Ron, and they don’t like to attack anything bigger than they are.”

“Right you are, Harry,” smiled Hagrid. “Takes a fair bit of power and magic to harm a unicorn, and while a werewolf might be able to do it, Harry is right, it’s the wrong time of the month.”

Hagrid pointed at an intersection in the path ahead of them. It was a grim sight, as the entire area seemed covered in thick silver unicorn blood. Harry shuddered at the sight, almost feeling the pain that the unicorn must have been feeling to lose that much blood and still keep moving. In the light of their wands, the thick silver blood made the area look ghostly, and more than a little frightening.

“We’ll split in to two groups,” Hagrid said, sounding sad as they looked at the bloody sight before them. “Ron and Neville, you lot come with me. Malfoy, you go with Harry and Fang.”

“Why do I have to go with Potter?” whined Malfoy.

“Because I say you do,” barked Hagrid.

Harry just groaned to himself at Hagrid’s announcement. The large man looked at him apologetically, but Harry could only shrug his shoulders and accept that he was in for a long night. As they practiced shooting sparks in the air, green for finding the unicorn and red for emergencies, the two groups made their separate ways into the forest.

“Watch your back, Harry,” Ron said firmly as they separated.

“Yeah, Potter,” sneered Malfoy, “watch your back.”



“Knock it off, Malfoy,” grunted Harry. “I don’t know about you, but I want to get out of this place in one piece. So, truce for tonight, because we need to work together in here or we’re in trouble.”

Malfoy looked like he was ready to say something nasty, but just then the two boys heard a slithering sound off to their right. Malfoy clamped his mouth closed tightly and that was the end of his comments for the night. Harry wanted to know what could make a sound like that, but Harry had no intention of wandering off the path to find out. Together with Fang, the two boys kept walking, neither of them wanting to think too much about what was waiting for them in the dark shadows of the forest.

Harry concentrated on their surroundings, while at the same time never letting Malfoy fall too far behind him. Keeping Malfoy in his peripheral vision, Harry would not put it past the Slytherin to try something devious when he least expected it. Still, as they walked deeper and deeper into the forest in pursuit of the silver blood, Malfoy did not attempt to harm or even scare Harry. In fact, the only sound Harry could hear other than the sounds of the woods, was the constant whimpering coming from Fang.

After thirty minutes following the trail of unicorn blood, Harry was starting to wonder how anything could bleed that much and not be dead. Almost as if the forest was listening to his thoughts, the path they were on suddenly widened into a large starlit clearing. The unicorn’s silver blood was everywhere. If Harry had not known how gruesome the sight in front of him really was, he would have thought the starlight reflected off the blood was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Of course, that would have only been until he noticed the dead unicorn laying in the middle of the clearing. Seeing that poor innocent creature like that was enough to bring tears to Harry’s eyes.

“Oh dear God,” Malfoy whispered, and Harry could only agree.

Turning to look at Malfoy, Harry was surprised by what he saw. Malfoy’s trademark sneer was gone now. Instead, Harry saw a little boy, his cheeks shining with tears, who looked as if he had been crying for his entire life and did not want anyone to know. Looking

away quickly, Harry realized that his own cheeks were wet with tears. He was just about to raise his wand to fire green sparks into the air when a pitch black shadow entered the clearing from the opposite side of the clearing.

Not knowing exactly why he did it, Harry pulled Malfoy and Fang back into the shadows of the forest so they would not be seen. Extinguishing his wand, and seeing that Malfoy did the same, Harry watched the dark shape move closer to the dead unicorn. Malfoy was too afraid to argue and he also watched the strangely sinister figure. Harry was grateful for at least that small favor, but he could tell that Malfoy was going to make a run for it at any moment.

That moment came sooner than Harry would have liked. Fang, being the coward that he was, suddenly started whimpering and whining as the figure buried its face in a deep gash on the unicorn's neck. The next thing Harry saw were two blood red eyes looking directly at him with enough hatred pouring from them that he wondered if the creature could kill with a gaze. When the black figure slowly stood up, Harry knew their time was up.

“RUN!” he yelled.

Harry and Malfoy, with Fang leading the way, ran as fast as they could back along the path that had led them to the clearing. Any hope Harry had that the dark figure would not follow them was crushed when a sinister laugh filled the air around them and he knew the creature was following them. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed it, and the fact that the shadowy creature was gaining on them.

“FASTER!” Harry shouted at Malfoy as he tried to push himself forward, pulling away from Malfoy.

A loud scream of pain stopped Harry in his tracks and forced him to turn around. Malfoy was sprawled on the ground several yards behind him. Harry was not sure what the pale-skinned boy had tripped on, but it was obvious that he was hurt. Whatever the reason,

Malfoy was in danger as Harry could see the dark figure that was chasing them growing closer every second.

Running back to Malfoy's side, Harry pushed all thoughts of hate out of his mind. Malfoy was in danger, and although the Slytherin boy might have tried to hurt him and his friends, Harry was not going to abandon him. Roughly pulling Malfoy back on to his feet, Harry knew it was already too late. The dark figure was almost on top of them. In fact it was so close that when he looked back at the shape of the evil form, he could actually see the silver blood on the beast's black robes.

Unsure as to why he did it, Harry pushed Malfoy behind him and yelled for the injured boy to run. Malfoy did not argue, running as fast as he could with his injured leg back the way that they had come. Harry for his part just turned around and faced the creature that was preparing to pounce on him. Drawing his wand he knew it was pointless, but Harry had to try and stop the shadowy man from going any further. Someone had to make it out alive, and Harry could not even think about sacrificing someone else's life to save his own.

"HARRY!"

Before he knew what was happening, three large shapes leapt past him and placed themselves between Harry and the approaching shape. Harry was confused because he could not tell if they were men on horseback, or some other type of creature. He did not have time to think about it as two strong arms suddenly lifted him up onto the back of a fourth creature.

"GO!" commanded a familiar voice.

"Yes, Sire!"

Harry realized immediately that he was not riding a horse, or at least not exactly a horse. A human torso rose from where the neck of the horse should be and Harry knew he was riding on a centaur. He could not really focus on that as he looked behind him and saw four figures, three centaurs and a human with a sword, battling with the dark figure that had been chasing him. There was a flash of green

light and he watched as one of the centaurs fell to the ground. Harry tried to see what had happened, but just then, the path twisted just enough to block his view of the battle. He prayed that his rescuers would be safe.

Turning back around, Harry looked closer at the centaur he was riding. It was hard to actually see anything about the magical creature because the centaur's skin and hide was jet black. If not for the occasional glimpse of starlight through the trees, Harry would have thought he was riding an invisible creature. It was only when they burst out of the forest that Harry stopped wondering if he was dreaming and accepted that he really was riding on a centaur.

Coming to a sudden stop, the black centaur turned suddenly and lifted Harry off his back. Harry was rather surprised when he was dropped on the ground just behind Hagrid's hut. Without a single word, the centaur turned and ran back into the woods, leaving Harry feeling a little stunned as he watched.

"Well... that was a little... strange..." Harry said to himself.

"Stranger still is the fact that he helped you at all," said the voice of a young woman. "He acts all noble, but he's really just an ass."

Jumpy from the events of the night, Harry spun around with his wand drawn. To his surprise the young woman turned out to be a snow white centaur filly. The young centaur female had her back to Harry, laying an unconscious Draco Malfoy on the damp ground, when he saw her. When she turned around to face him, Harry felt his face turn bright red, and he could not take his eyes off the two most beautiful...

"My face is up here, you know," giggled the centaur filly, crossing her arms over her ample chest. "It never fails to amaze me how human males can be so easily distracted by something so ordinary as a pair of breasts."

Harry's eyes, now firmly focused on her face, turned even redder at her words. He absolutely refused to look anywhere else, even when she uncrossed her arms and slowly moved closer to him.

“My name is Grace,” continued the filly. “The one that rescued you is my older brother, Bane.”

“I’m Harry...”

“Potter,” Grace finished for him. “I know who you are. The stars have been singing your name for years now.”

“The stars?”

“We centaurs can read the stars, and occasionally find the truths that they hide,” she said solemnly. “Unlike the males of my race, we females know that the stars are not the focus of our lives. My brother sees how unusually bright Mars is tonight and feels that a war is coming. He believes, as to most of my people, that we should not interfere. I know better. We centaurs are a part of this world, and the war to come, and we must do what we can to help fight the darkness that threatens all of us.”

“You know,” said a very frustrated Harry, “you sound just like my history teacher. I don’t understand what you are trying to say, and I still don’t get why my name is written in the stars. I also want to know what that thing was that was chasing me in the woods. And while we’re at it, what happened to Malfoy?”

“Listen carefully then,” Grace said with a strained smile. “Your friend here bumped his head on a low branch while I was bringing him here. I probably should have warned him, but he had a bad case of wandering hands, so it just slipped my mind.”

Harry could not help but laugh at that mental image. Only Malfoy would be stupid enough to try and grope his rescuer.

“As for that creature,” continued the centaur, all traces of a smile now gone from her face. “It is a terrible crime against nature to slay a unicorn. It is even worse to partake of the flesh or blood of one. That foul creature has now killed two unicorns. He has consumed their blood to prolong his own life, for that is a power of unicorn blood.

Even if you should be a moment from death, the blood of a unicorn can bring you back, but it is at a terrible price.”

“What price?” Harry asked, still not sure how all of this related to him.

“For slaying a unicorn and drinking its blood, you are cursed to a half life,” Grace said in a hushed tone. “Neither completely alive or dead. From that moment on, you are a monster, and there is no redemption for you.”

“You would have to be pretty desperate to do it then,” Harry said more to himself than to Grace. “Only someone with absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain would be foolish enough to do it. I just can’t see how it would help them in the long run.”

“He’s a quick one,” thought Grace with a smile. “He might even be as quick as a centaur.”

“The Stone!” Harry exclaimed as the pieces fit together in his mind. “Unicorn blood keeps him alive until he gets the stone! That was Voldemort in there, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was, Harry,” she confirmed with a sad smile. “Which also answers your first question. You wanted to know why the stars sing your name.”

“Yes.”

“We centaurs see many things in the stars,” she continued. “We see the past, present, and future. Your name is written clearly amongst them, but your path is unclear.”

Shaking his head, Harry sighed. “What does that mean?”

“It means that someone of great power has touched your life, and in doing so they have changed your fate,” she answered with a smile.

“I’m guessing by the smile on your face that we are not talking about Voldemort?”

“No,” confirmed Grace. “This was not done with evil intent, although Voldemort has also had a hand in shaping your path. The one that reshaped your fate did not do it to harm you, but only to help you. There is also a third force trying to tamper with your fate. We do not know why, but they are trying to force you down a very narrow path that most likely will lead to sorrow and misery for many people.”

“Three meddlers,” mused Harry.

Hagrid picked just that moment to step out of the forest behind Harry, Neville and Ron following closely in his footsteps. All three were pale and out of breath, it looked like they had been running, and Hagrid’s crossbow hung in pieces from the large man’s hands. Given Harry’s own experience in the forest that night, he figured they must have run into something just as deadly as he had.

“ ‘ Ello, Grace,” Hagrid greeted, his voice seemingly filled with sorrow.

“Greetings, Hagrid,” Grace smiled back at him. “It has been a long time since I saw you last.”

Harry was barely paying attention to Grace. He could tell from the expressions on his friends’ faces that something was wrong. They seemed filled with sadness, and not even the sight of a bare chested female centaur could force their eyes up from the grass at their feet. If they could not look at Grace’s... assets... then Harry knew that whatever had happened must have been really bad.

“What troubles you, Hagrid?” Grace finally asked, catching on to the feeling of dread that hung heavily in the air.

“You should return home now, Grace,” Hagrid said, his voice thick with emotion and a single tear rolling down his face.

Fear was now obvious on Grace's face as she moved closer to Hagrid. "Tell me what's wrong, Hagrid."

"Firenze," Hagrid said softly as he looked down at his dolphin sized feet.

"What about my betrothed?"

"He's gone, Grace," mumbled Hagrid before looking back into her eyes. "He's dead."

For a moment, Harry thought the centaur girl had been struck dumb. Her eyes stared sightlessly at Hagrid, her entire body trembling. Then, just as Harry could no longer stand the silence, she collapsed against Hagrid's massive chest. She screamed out to the stars above her utter rejection of the gentle gamekeeper's news.

"Noooooooooo!"

Hagrid barely managed to keep her from injuring herself as Grace collapsed to the ground. Harry watched, his own shock clearly visible on his face. All he could do was watch as Hagrid eased the sobbing centaur to the ground. He held her in his arms like a parent holds their child, and tried to ease her pain. Harry wanted to do something for her, but he did not know what if anything he could do for her.

They stood there like that, Harry and his friends, watching with tear filled eyes as Grace mourned her loss. It was only when Professor McGonagall, awakened from her slumber by the wails of the centaur, made her way to Hagrid's hut that they left and followed their head of house back to the castle. Malfoy floated along behind them, still unconscious from his run in with a tree. Harry barely paid any attention though as his thoughts were filled with only one desire.

"I will stop him," Harry thought fiercely. "I will not let anyone else die for me because of Voldemort!"



Ohai-yo,

Well this is a surprise. It seems I'm posting another chapter very quickly after the last, and that can mean only one thing. It's done.

Yes, it's true. After all this time I have finally finished writing the last chapter, and the epilogue. Both have been sent off to my betas, and hopefully you will be seeing them very soon.

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. I am nothing without their dedication and skill, not to mention the fact that they put up with me. ;)

Now go read, and please review.

Chris

PS. A big thanks to everyone that reviewed. It always puts a smile on my face to read what you think about my stories, and i promise I'll be responding to all of them in the next day or two. :)

## Chapter 16: Seeking the Stone

"I'm telling you that's 'Pennsylvania 6-5000.'" Harry said to Ron firmly. "It's a Muggle song."

"You're wrong, Harry," Ron replied stubbornly. "That's the new song by the Sultry Sirens, 'Hogsmeade, 75-hundred.'"

Harry just sighed and looked over at Hermione for help. "Can't you make him understand?"

"I rather doubt it Harry," chuckled Hermione. "He's not going to believe it until you play him the original song."

Their argument had started while relaxing near the lake after their final exam of the term. One of the older students had brought out a wizarding wireless and now the grounds were filled with music. It had

been a lot of fun for everyone until Harry noticed that many of the songs they were hearing were Muggle ones from years before. He had asked Hermione about it and she had agreed and the argument had begun.

“Some Muggle band copied this one, “ Ron said, looking confident in his theory.

“The original song was written back in the 30’s or 40’s, Ron” Hermione said firmly, trying to end the argument quickly.

“The Sirens aren’t that old,” replied Ron, completely missing the point.

Harry turned away from the argument. He could not blame Ron for his point of view. From what Harry could see after his full introduction to the Wizarding world, Muggles were ahead of them culturally by at least thirty years. It probably had to do with the way in which they had to hide from Muggles, but it made it difficult to adjust for Muggle-borns. In many ways it was like stepping back in history to a more innocent time. Maybe that was a good thing, but it seemed to stifle creativity.

Looking out across the grounds towards Hagrid’s hut, Harry could not help but feel sad at the snow-white form of Grace as she lay on the ground near the groundskeeper’s hut. Seeing her there tore at Harry’s heart. Her grief was so raw that no one could console her and she had spent much of her time since the night in the forest crying

In a gesture that softened Harry’s heart towards him, at least a little bit, Dumbledore had told the mourning centaur that she was welcome to stay on the grounds as long as she needed. Harry was unsure why Grace did not want to return to the forest. Still, he felt that it was her decision to make. Considering what he now knew of her past, Harry would defend her right to choose her own path.

Grace was much like Harry in that she was an orphan of the last war against Voldemort. Her mother had been killed shortly after Grace’s delivery, and another mare had been selected to raise her. Now,

some sixteen years later, Grace would only hint at the identity of her mother's killer, but Harry knew. Voldemort had taken much and given nothing in return.

Standing up slowly, Harry left his arguing friends and walked towards the grieving centaur. He could not help but laugh when he saw her wearing what looked like a Muggle sun dress to cover her ample bosom. The girls of the school had taken it upon themselves to make sure Grace was properly clothed at all times, especially when they saw how the male students stared at the bare-chested filly. Now the female students took turns providing Grace with dresses or long blouses in order to "make her look pretty." They did not realize that Grace thought them to be foolish, but she was too devastated by her loss to say anything to the girls.

"You look pretty in blue," Harry said with a wink as he approached the centaur.

"Bah!" Grace grunted. "I am a centaur, not a doll for them to play with. I only wear these silly rags to please your friend, Mr. Knight."

That was another interesting turn of events. It turned out that Grace knew Mr. Knight, as did all the centaurs, and respected him greatly. Harry had several suspicions concerning Mr. Knight's real identity, but that was also another question for later. Truth be told, the very fact that the overly proud centaurs respected him so highly spoke volumes concerning Mr. Knight, or whatever his real name might be.

"He only wants you to fit in better," Harry said gently, sitting next to his newest friend.

"I am not a pack horse, Harry," sighed the exasperated centaur. "I do not need these harnesses or saddles. I am a free being of nature."

"It's too tight again, isn't it?" Harry asked before Grace could continue. "You only use the free being of nature line when the clothes are too tight."

Harry could not help but laugh when Grace's snow-white face suddenly turned bright pink. He knew she would have preferred to be "free" as she put it, but she secretly enjoyed the attention the female students paid her. Grace had even grown fond of a few of the students during her stay at Hagrid's. Harry even suspected that she considered some of the young women to be friends, not that she would ever openly admit it unless she was forced to. As far as Harry was concerned, it did not matter so long as Grace was a little happier than she had been.

Still blushing, Grace nodded her head and smiled bashfully. "Hermione made this for me, but it is too tight across my chest. It makes it hard to move."

"And you didn't want to insult her by telling her it needed to be bigger," Harry finished for her.

Once again Grace blushed and nodded. Harry chuckled before showing the centaur female how to loosen the top by adjusting the laces that ran down the front. After several minutes of Grace adjusting the top, and several embarrassing episodes for Harry, the young centaur was finally comfortable.

"That is so much better," Grace finally said, taking a deep breath and smiling at Harry.

"Then it's time for some exercise," Harry said firmly, standing up. "You've barely left this spot in weeks."

"I move when I eat and when I...." she said firmly but Harry cut her off.

"Yes," he said just as firmly, "Then you come right back and lay down again. Hagrid says that isn't good for you, and I agree. So, you either come with me now, or I tell Hagrid to make you move."

"You wouldn't dare, you arrogant human," Grace snapped back.

“Try me, you stubborn nag,” retorted Harry. That got a reaction out of the centaur. She was on her feet, towering over Harry in a moment. She looked mad enough to actually attack him, but when Harry suddenly smiled up at her and stepped forward to wrap his arms around her torso in an awkward hug, she immediately calmed down.

“See,” he said softly, “that wasn’t so hard.”

Grace tried to glare at the small human that was currently hugging her, but could not manage to stay mad at him. Reaching down, she hugged him back and smiled at him.

“You’re very lucky I like you, Harry Potter.” Grace said when they broke apart. “Otherwise I would kill you for calling me that.”

“Well then you’re lucky I like you enough to risk it,” Harry cheekily replied.

Enjoying the warm weather, the odd companions walked, or trotted as the case might be, around the grounds of the school. Each asked questions regarding the other, finding comfort in each other’s company. When they reached the farthest edge of the grounds from the forest, Grace stopped and looked around with an odd expression on her face.

“This is the farthest I have ever been from my home in the forest,” she said suddenly.

“Why haven’t you returned to your family, Grace?” Harry asked, curious as to her reluctance.

Grace seemed lost in thought for a moment before she answered. “Firenze was to be my mate when I reached breeding age. There are no other males in the herd right now, so I am alone now.”

“I’m sorry, Grace,” Harry said gently. “He died to save my life.”

“It is not your fault, Harry,” replied Grace, laying a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Firenze gave his life to serve the heavens. There is no greater honor for a centaur.”

“But if I had just run faster, none of this would have happened,” he said feeling responsible for Grace’s sadness.

“You cannot outrun the heavens, Harry,” Grace said firmly, but soothingly. “Firenze agreed to help you when we were called, and he would not want you to feel bad about it.”

Harry thought about Grace’s words and nodded his understanding. “I will honor his memory, Grace. What will you do now?”

“I may remain here at the school,” Grace answered softly, “or I may leave and seek another herd. There must be another herd somewhere.”

An idea came to Harry as he stood there with the sad looking centaur. “Grace? If you want, you could stay with my family for the summer holiday.”

Looking rather shocked at the idea, Grace wondered if the boy before her knew how special he was. She had met only a handful of adult wizards and none of them had been half as nice to her as Harry. Was that why the stars practically revolved around him?

“Thank you for the offer, Harry,” Grace replied with a warm smile. “I will think about your offer and let you know what I decide. I must say, it sounds much better than staying here and listening to Hagrid talking about that three-headed dog of his again.”

Harry’s face went deathly pale at her words and he looked at her seriously. “Hagrid told you about Fluffy?”

“Oh yes,” answered the centaur. “He’s been talking about that dog every chance he gets. I think he is trying to impress me with his skill with animals. Last night he was telling several professors about it

while they celebrated the end of the term. To think music puts the beast to sleep.”

“Grace,” Harry said very serious now. “This is really important. Who was there that night?”

Rather startled by Harry’s sudden change in attitude, Grace nodded and started to tell him what she had seen. “Well, several professors were there. Flitwick and Sprout were the first to arrive. A few others came by later.”

“Who?” Harry nearly shouted, worry clearly evident on his face now. “Was Quirrell there?”

“I think he came by later on,” she started, but Harry was already running towards the school.

Shocked by Harry’s reaction, it took Grace a moment to react and chase after the running boy. Much to her surprise, even at a fast gallop, Harry was outrunning her. Never in all of her experience had she heard of such a thing. It took everything she had to keep up. By the time they reached Harry’s friends by the lake, Grace was breathing heavily, but Harry seemed as fresh as if he had only walked across the grounds.

“Quirrell knows how to get past Fluffy!” he was telling the others. “We have to warn someone right away!”

“We should tell Professor Dumbledore.” Hermione suggested.

“Maybe Professor Snape,” added Neville. “If he was guarding the stone back at Halloween he would know what to do.”

“Let’s go with that,” Harry said firmly. “I’ve no clue where Dumbledore’s office is, but Professor Snape should be in the potions dungeon.”

Turning to Grace, Harry looked at her with such determination that she wondered when he had learned such feelings. “Grace, I need you

to look for Mr. Knight. I know the centaurs can find him, and I think we are going to need him."

"Harry," Grace said, worried now. "This is what the stars warned about. You must be very careful!"

"I know," Harry replied calmly. "Now go find Mr. Knight, please?"

Grace nodded and sprinted towards the forest while Harry and his friends ran towards the school. Several minutes found the four friends banging on the Potion Master's office door. Within seconds, Snape jerked the door open, fully intending to strangle whoever was causing so much noise. It was only the look on Harry's face that stopped him from saying anything as Harry and his friends pushed past him and into his office.

"What's the meaning of this?" Snape asked closing the door.

"Quirrell found out how to get past Fluffy last night," was Harry's calm reply. "We think he'll make his move on the stone as soon as he thinks it's safe."

Snape looked as if all his blood had just drained from his body. His normal cool demeanor was replaced by an open-mouthed confusion as he stared at Harry for a full minute. Slowly the potions teacher seemed to regain his senses, at least enough to close his mouth.

"How do you know about the stone?" Snape asked slowly.

"It's a really long story Professor," Harry said calmly. "I promise I'll tell you everything, but not right now. You've got to warn everyone that the stone is in danger."

Snape nodded and pulled out his wand. A second later there was a silver flash in the room and a streak of light as something moved out of the room and off to who knew where.

"How did you know I suspected Quirrell of attempting to steal the stone?" asked the now calm professor.



"I overheard you and Quirrell in the woods after our last Quidditch match," answered Harry.

"I can't wait to hear this full story, Harry," Snape said shaking his head. "I have a feeling it will prove to be very... interesting"

Harry nodded his head before Snape continued. "I want you and your friends to return to your common room for now. I am going to go check on the stone and then I will come find you and we will all go speak with Professor Dumbledore."

"Yes, sir," the students all said and soon they were heading for Gryffindor tower.

The next several hours were spent by the four friends in the common room waiting for some news as to what was happening. For the most part, Harry spent the time pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, occasionally looking out the windows as if looking for a message or a sign. As each hour passed, Harry became more convinced that something was wrong.

"Come on," Harry finally said at ten that evening. "We've waited long enough. I had hoped professor Snape or Mr. Knight would have shown up by now, but since they haven't..."

"It's up to us to find out what is going on," finished Ron.

Neville stood up with a determined look on his face. "What do you have in mind, Harry?"

Looking from friend to friend, Harry saw the determination in all of their eyes. "We go through the trapdoor and find that bloody stone."

"And if Quirrell is there?" asked Hermione.

"Then we stop him somehow," Harry said, hoping he could actually figure out a way to live up to that statement.

Without waiting for anyone to say another word, the four of them marched out of the portrait hole. In an amazingly short amount of time they were standing in front of the door leading to the third floor corridor. Harry had not seen a single teacher on their trip through the school. He had even been looking for the prefects, but nothing. Given his warning to Professor Snape, Harry had expected the corridors to be flooded with people, not to find the school effectively abandoned.

“This isn’t right,” Harry said, not even bothering to whisper

Ron nodded and looked around slowly. “You notice there are no ghosts? There are always ghosts running around.”

“Yeah,” Neville said as he also looked around. “No sign of Mrs. Norris, and she always chases us around.”

“What do you think it means, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Nothing good,” sighed Harry. “I think we need to hurry.”

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Harry slowly opened the door and peered inside. Fluffy was sleeping peacefully, one massive paw on either side of the trapdoor with his middle head resting on the neck of his left head. Harry could hear soft music coming from a magical harp right next to the door. He let out the breath he had not realized he was holding before motioning his friends to follow him inside.

As silently as they could, the four friends crept across the room until they stood in front of the trapdoor, and more importantly, the monstrous dog. A small voice in the back of Harry’s mind, an echo of the boy he had been before coming to Hogwarts, screamed for him to run away. Harry refused to run though because he knew something had to be done to stop Voldemort from getting the stone.

At a signal from Harry, Neville and Ron lifted the trapdoor as quietly as possible. While the two boys did that, Harry and Hermione tried to peer into the dark shaft the door covered. They could see nothing, but

the air smelled damp and rather like the woods behind Harry's house after it rained. It was a little unnerving how quiet it was as well.

"Quiet?" Harry thought to himself. "It shouldn't be that quiet..."

Looking up slowly Harry realized that the only sound in the room now was the heavy breathing of his friends and the even heavier breathing of the monstrous three-headed dog. He was not the only one that had noticed the sudden silence and from their chalk white faces, Harry knew his friends were terrified. Harry could not blame them as he turned to look at the dog's fangs.

Worries about how deep the hole at their feet were quickly forgotten as Harry knew they had to get away from Fluffy. Reaching over to Hermione, Harry pushed her into the opening. Her scream went on for a long time, and was not unnoticed by Fluffy. The dog was quickly waking up and Harry knew they were out of time.

"Go!" hissed Harry, pointing at Ron.

Ron nodded and jumped into the darkness without making a sound. Harry took his place holding up the heavy trapdoor, and then looked at Neville to indicate that he should go next. To Harry's surprise, Neville shook his head and indicated that he wanted Harry to go first. They silently argued about it until Neville suddenly went chalk white again.

Harry had no warning when Neville suddenly reached forward and jerked him forward into the hole at his feet. Looking up, Harry watched a massive shadow lunge forward as a smaller shadow seemed to dive forward. All of this happened in a matter of seconds, but the scream of pain and what sounded like a large tree limb snapping could be clearly heard. Harry lost sight of the smaller shadow seconds later as the square of light that was the trapdoor suddenly went black, not that he had time to think about it.

With a surprisingly soft landing, Harry found himself at the bottom of the shaft. Harry's relief that his landing was a soft one was forgotten a moment later when something hard hit him on the head, causing

everything to fade into a distorted haze of pain. He seemed to float in that strange place for a time before he heard voices calling his name.

“Please, Harry,” pleaded a girl’s voice. “You have to wake up!”

“Pull it together, mate,” cried a familiar voice.

Harry tried to listen to the voices, but his head seemed to be filled with fluff and small buzzing insects. No matter how much he wanted to, the bugs just would not stop making noise so he could hear what was going on. In fact, all he wanted to do was sleep and listen to the buzzing in his head.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” whispered a third voice, a young man’s voice. “Ginny is in danger, Harry! If you don’t wake up, she’ll be hurt badly!”

“NO!” shouted Harry, snapping out of his stupor and looking around for Ginny. “Where is she?”

“Calm down, Harry,” soothed Hermione, crawling over next to Harry in the near pitch black room. “Neville just said that to get you to wake up.”

Harry looked around to try and get an idea of where he was, but it was too dark to see anything. There was a thick smell of burnt leaves in the air, and Harry’s eyes stung from the heavy smoke that filled the room. Shaking his head to clear it of the last of his fuzziness, Harry stood and pulled his wand out of his back pocket.

“Lumos,” he said firmly.

Looking at his friends in the harsh white light from his wand, Harry felt his gut clench up. They were all covered in thick black soot and except for Neville, they seemed uninjured. Neville more than made up for everyone else. From what he could see, Neville had broken an arm and leg, not to mention he was bleeding from a head wound. “Oh, God! Neville, are you alright?” Harry asked as he knelt next to his injured friend.

“I’m fine, Harry,” Neville answered with a light whisper. “Bloody dog just messed me up a little bit.”

“He saved us though, Harry,” smiled Ron.

“You should have seen it, Harry,” said Hermione in a shaky voice. “Neville realized immediately that we had landed in a nest of Devil’s Snare. He used Lumos to make it let go and then burned it.”

“It was nothing, Harry,” slurred Neville, his injuries dulling his mind.

“We’ve got to get him out of here, Harry,” pleaded Hermione.

“How do you plan on doing that?” Ron said looking up into the shaft above them. “Even if we could get back up the shaft, we would still have to get past that dog.”

Harry was barely paying attention. Remembering the first aid that his Uncle Remus had taught him, Harry was trying to tend to Neville’s injuries. Neville’s arm looked like a clean break, but his leg was a mess.

“It’s a bad break,” Harry thought as he tore open Neville’s pant leg. “I’ve got to stop the bleeding before he goes into shock.”

Ron and Hermione stood over Harry, their wands now lit so he could concentrate on Neville’s wounds. Glancing up at Neville’s face, he could tell Neville was already going into shock, and Harry did not know any healing spells that would help. Pulling off his school robes, Harry wrapped it around his injured friend.

“Brilliant, Harry,” he cursed to himself. “Great plan. We’re trapped down here and Neville is a mess because I had to be the hero.”

“Ron,” he said as he pulled off his belt. “Run to the next room and see if there is anything there we can use to get out of here:”

“You got it,” Ron shouted as he ran down the tunnel that led from the room.

“Stay awake, Neville,” commanded Harry.

Neville’s eyes popped open and looked directly into Harry’s. “I’m awake now, Harry.”

“Good, stay that way,” grunted Harry, tightening his belt around Neville’s leg in a makeshift tourniquet.

Harry could hear Hermione’s fear filled whispering, but he had to deal with one problem at a time. Seeing that Neville was not losing as much blood now, Harry looked up at Hermione and tried to reassure her with a smile. The frightened girl tried to smile back, but it looked more like she wanted to scream.

“Some hero I am,” he said with a wink, trying to get her to laugh. “I’ve got no horse to come riding in on and my armor looks a bit dirty.”

“Harry,” Hermione said with a smile, “You may not own a horse, but you are a hero.”

“She’s right, Harry,” Neville agreed.

“But I led you here,” protested Harry. “You got hurt and we’re trapped, Neville.”

“You may have led us there,” Ron said firmly as he re-entered the small room, “but we chose to follow you.”

Harry was going to protest, but his words were cut off by Ron handing him an old school broom.

“There’s a large room down the tunnel a ways. Some odd birds are flying high over head and I found these brooms. We can at least use the brooms to get out of here.”

“Good idea, Ron,” smiled Harry, noticing three other brooms in Ron’s hands.

“But the dog?” asked Hermione. “How do we get back past Fluffy?”

“We could sing,” Ron suggested.

Neville snorted with laughter at the idea. “No offense, Ron, but your singing could wake the dead.”

They all had a good laugh as they mounted their brooms. Ron and Harry held Neville between them. Slowly they lifted up into the air, all thoughts of the stone forgotten in their need to get Neville to the hospital ward. There was still an obstacle to their escape, the trapdoor. As they neared the door they realized that the shaft was now so narrow that only one of them could fit through at a time, and by themselves, no one could open the door.

“Go back down,” grunted Ron after his third attempt at ramming the trapdoor. “I think Fluffy is sitting on the door.”

Muttering every curse word he could remember hearing from his uncles, Harry slowly descended back to the chamber floor. Neville had gone quiet again and looked paler than ever in the light from Hermione’s wand. Things seemed to be going from bad to worse when suddenly the trapdoor above them opened and two familiar faces looked down at Harry and the others.

“Look what we have here, brother of mine,” laughed one of the smiling faces.

“You suppose they were trying to hide down there?” asked the other with a wide grin.

“Fred! George!” shouted Ron with a look of absolute admiration in his eyes. “I could kiss you two!”

“Save that for the young lady with you,” the two smiling boys said at once.

Fred and George Weasley jumped down through the trapdoor with their broomsticks in hand. Moments later, the six of them were safely on the ground while George cast several spells on Neville to heal the boy's less severe wounds. Harry had to admire the Weasley twins. Not only were they funny, but they came in handy as well.

When Harry commented on that fact, Fred and George started laughing. "You can't be in as many scrapes as we have been and not learn a bit of healing magic."

"But how did you find us?" Hermione suddenly asked.

"Well that's a bit of a strange story," said one of the twins.

"We were just about to turn in when there was a knock at the door," continued the other.

"Who was it?" Harry asked intently.

"No one," answered Fred. "There was just a roll of parchment on the floor."

"We of course opened it," continued George finishing his work on Neville, then handing a roll of parchment to Harry.

Fred and George,

Ron and his friends may need your help tonight. I strongly suggest that you grab your brooms and look for them in your own special manner. Please Hurry!

M. K.

PS: Tell Harry that he must go on, and to hurry. I will be there as soon as I can.

Harry nodded and looked back at the twins. "Take Neville and the others to Madame Pomfrey. I'll go ahead and see what I can do to



stop Quirrell. We are going to talk about how you found us when this is over.”

Ron and Hermione cut him off before he could say another word. “No way are we letting you go alone!”

Harry looked pleadingly at Fred and George for help but they were already mounted on their brooms, Neville’s broom between them. As they slowly rose into the air Fred looked back over his shoulder.

“Your friend said you had to go on,” he said simply.

“He didn’t say you had to go alone,” finished George as they continued to rise.

“Good luck!” called Neville as the three of them made their way out of the trapdoor.

“You guys,” Harry said as he turned back to Ron and Hermione. “It’s not too late to go back.”

“We’re not letting you go alone,” grunted Ron.

“Friends don’t let friends do stuff like this alone,” Hermione said, crossing her arms. “We’re with you all the way.”

Harry really wanted to protest, but he was thankful they stayed. No matter how brave he tried to look on the outside, Harry was terrified on the inside. He prayed that Mr. Knight would get there soon. Harry was grateful for his friends, but he doubted three eleven-year-old wizards would be much of a challenge to Quirrell.

“Thanks guys,” smiled Harry. “Let’s go.”

Holding out her hand to them both, Hermione was soon walking between the two boys down the short tunnel that led to the next room. The room was larger than the Great Hall, with its ceiling lost in darkness far above them. Harry thought something was moving in the

darkness above them, but that was not as interesting at the sight before them.

“What happened here?” whispered Hermione.

Harry had no idea what had happened, but if he had to guess he would say that someone had used acid to melt a hole in the wall in front of them. Obviously they had been in a hurry and did not want to be bothered by the still intact door next to the hole. Whatever the case, Harry was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Come on,” he urged the others, stepping with them into another short tunnel.

This time they stepped into a room that was well lit. There were dozens of statues standing in front of them and more in pieces to either side. The ruined statues looked as if they had also had acid used on them, as did part of the floor.

“It’s a chessboard, Harry,” Ron said calmly. “I think we have to play our way across”

“One way to find out,” Harry said, stepping onto the chessboard, approaching the black king nearest them. “Pardon me, but are we to play across?”

With a sound like fingernails on a chalkboard, the large black statue nodded to Harry. “Well that answers that.”

Hermione looked at Harry for a moment as if he was a complete mystery to her. “What in the world made you think that statue would answer you?”

“Well it’s magic, isn’t it?” he replied with a wink.

“Good one, Harry,” chuckled Ron. “I guess we better play then.”

“It’s your game, Ron,” Harry agreed. “You’re the best at chess, so you call the shots.”

Ron nodded and started calling out instructions. The three of them replaced three black pieces and then the game began with the white pieces. Soon it became apparent that the game was just like any other Wizard's chess game as the pieces destroyed each other. Ron commended the game from atop a black knight horse, making sure to keep Harry and Hermione safe from attack.

Three quarters of an hour later the game came to an abrupt halt. Having tried to follow all of Ron's moves closely, Harry knew they were close to winning. However, Ron seemed hesitant to make a move. Harry looked around the board at all the possible moves Ron could make, and then he saw the problem.

"Ron?" Harry asked calmly.

"Figured it out, didn't you?" answered Ron.

Hermione was looking around in an attempt to see what her friends were talking about. She hated to admit it, but Hermione knew that chess was one of those things she could not seem to understand no matter how much she read about it. Still, from Ron and Harry's tone of voice, something was wrong.

"What are you two talking about?" she finally asked, feeling frustration at not understanding.

"Ron is going to sacrifice himself," Harry said, his voice sounding hollow.

"NO!" wailed Hermione. "There has to be another way!"

Harry and Ron shared a glance, though Hermione missed it entirely. "There isn't, Hermione. I'll take that pawn, and then the queen will take me. Once she does that, you take the queen and we've won the game."

"But there has to be another way, Ron!" Hermione pleaded.

Before she could say anything else, Ron called the move causing the black horse he was riding to step forward and take the pawn, trampling it under stone hooves.

“Check!” Ron said firmly as the white queen slid forward for the kill. “Finish the game, Hermione!”

With a sound like a cannon blast, the white queen struck Ron’s black horse with her staff. Harry watched powerlessly, dread filling his heart, as Ron was flung like a rag doll and crashed limply into the far wall. Hermione almost broke then, ready to run to where Ron lay.

“STOP!” shouted Harry. “Make the final move and we win! Otherwise we have to start over and his sacrifice won’t mean anything!”

Hermione was frozen by Harry’s words, her soot covered face streaked with clean tracks made by her tears. Finally, she stepped over to the white queen to win the game. Harry almost laughed when the small girl kicked the statue, which immediately slid off the board.

“Checkmate!” she screamed and the white king nodded and tossed its crown to the ground.

Barely waiting for the stone crown to hit the ground, the two children ran over to where Ron lay amid the wreckage. Hermione reached him first, her face covered in tears as she tried to see if he was injured without moving him in case he was. Harry kneeled beside her, hoping Ron was going to be okay.

“Why?” moaned Hermione. “There had to be another way.”

“There was,” whispered Harry.

“What do you mean?” gasped Hermione.

“He had a choice, Hermione,” continued Harry. “He could have sacrificed himself, or he could have sacrificed you. Either move would have won the game, but Ron didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“But why would he do that?” asked the confused young witch.

“Because,” Harry said, a gentle smirk on his face, “sometimes your knight in shining armor rides a black horse.”

More tears spilled down Hermione’s cheeks at Harry’s words. She stared at Harry, for a moment before looking down at the injured boy. Harry watched her take Ron’s hand in hers and smiled to himself.

“I hope he doesn’t mind,” he chuckled to himself. “I think she’s going to be holding his hand for a long time.”

He was suddenly distracted by the impatient sound of someone tapping their foot. The white pieces had cleared a path to the next door, but time was evidently running out. Harry did not like the thought of leaving Ron behind, but what choice did he have? Then it hit him and he knew exactly what to do.

“Hermione,” Harry said, standing up. “Stay here with Ron. Help will be here soon, so make sure they know to follow me.”

“No, Harry!” shouted the young witch. “You can’t go alone. What if Quirrell tries to hurt you?”

“Don’t worry, Hermione,” Harry assured her. “I’m not going far, just in to the next room.”

Harry was a little surprised when Hermione suddenly ran at him and hugged him so tightly that it was hard to breathe. After a moment, she let him go and returned to Ron’s side. Turning towards the far door, Harry hoped he was not making a mistake. He was almost at the door when Hermione called out to him one last time.

“You may not be a knight in shining armor, Harry Potter,” she called after him, “but you ARE a hero!”

Harry looked back over his shoulder to see Hermione kneeling next to Ron. He silently prayed that this would not be the last time he would

see his friends. Mr. Knight had said that he had to keep going, but he had not said whether or not Harry would be coming back. Turning back towards the door, he placed his faith in his benefactor.

“Thanks, Hermione,” he said as he walked through the door, never knowing if she replied because it immediately closed behind him.

Once again Harry found himself in a short tunnel which quickly opened into another large room. As soon as Harry entered the room, he wished he had stayed with Hermione and Ron. The stench that filled the room was horrendous, and so was the source. Sprawled across the center of the room was a troll even larger than the one he had faced on Halloween. Lucky for him, this troll was already unconscious, possibly even dead.

Quickly running across the room to the far wall, Harry stepped through another door and into yet another short tunnel. Harry took several deep breaths, trying to clear the stench of the troll from his lungs. When his eyes stopped watering, he moved forward once again, hoping this time he would find either a way out, or at least a puzzle that did not smell so bad.

He was therefore quite happy to see that the next room looked like nothing more than an abandoned classroom. The only thing in the room was a still smoking table with several broken bottles lying on the floor around it. Evidently someone had defeated this puzzle the same way they had the troll, by destroying the obstacle.

” I got lucky again,” Harry thought as he walked over to the door. “Not sure that’s a good thing. If I use up my luck now, I may run out when I really need it.”

As he opened the last door, Harry could see a large room beyond it. It rather looked to Harry as if it had been an auditorium or theater classroom at some point in the past. Now it was being used to house a very familiar object. Closing the door behind him, Harry slowly approached the tall mirror that had occupied his mind for a time over the Christmas holiday.

“What's this doing here?” Harry asked himself. “I thought Dumbledore was going to put it someplace safe?”

“Oh he did, Potter,” said a familiar voice.

Two figures stepped out from behind the mirror and for a fleeting moment, hope filled Harry before it went cold in his chest. Doubt and horror filled Harry as he looked at the face of the one person he had thought would help him. Now that person looked at him with contempt clearly showing on his face.

“Professor Snape?”

Ohai-yo,

Okay... I'm getting tired of saying I'm sorry for taking so long to post recently. This time I can honestly say that there is a good reason, although I cannot say what the reason is.

No matter. This is the last true chapter of this story, though there will be a very short epilogue to follow. I ask only that you reserve your judgments, and any possible flames, until after you have read both this chapter and the next.

Thanks go out as always to my lovely and talented betas, C & M. I am nothing without their dedication and skill. Don't forget to thank them in the reviews. :)

Now go read, and please review.

Chris

PS. Thanks to everyone that helped this story to exceed 40,000 hits. There may be stories out there with more hits, but not with better readers. :)

## Chapter 17: The Two Faced Man

“Professor Snape?”

Harry was completely stunned at seeing the man he trusted standing next to Quirrell as if they were long time friends. Mr. Knight had told him to trust Snape, but evidently the Potions Master had fooled Harry's benefactor. It was a crushing blow to Harry's confidence, and suddenly he felt like the orphan boy that an entire village had hated. He could only watch in horror as Snape sneered at him.

“Why, Professor?” he begged, trying to make sense of the situation.

“Because my true master has returned, Potter!” hissed Snape.



Harry felt his mind cloud with confusion as he looked from Snape to the now confident looking Quirrell. "Quirrell is your master?"

"Don't be foolish, boy," answered a cold whisper that seemed to come from behind Quirrell.

Harry looked closer at Quirrell. Quirrell was not wearing his ridiculous headdress, making Harry notice how very small the man's head looked without it. He was just about to comment on it when Quirrell turned around. Harry suddenly wanted to vomit at the sight before him. Where the back of Quirrell's head should have been was a face, if you could really call it a face. Blood red eyes peered out of a half formed face with slits for a nose and a cruel looking mouth. It would be a long time before Harry stopped seeing that face in his nightmares.

"Severus and Quirrell have repeatedly told me how you are rather dim witted," said the face with a sneer, "but I had hoped they were exaggerating."

"Voldemort," gasped Harry as the reality sank in.

"You dare say the Dark Lord's name!" snarled Snape, reaching for his wand.

"Now, Severus," soothed Voldemort. "We must be courteous to young Mr. Potter. He must be rather shocked to find us here."

Harry tried to clear his mind of the overwhelming fear that tried to crush him. Here before him stood the darkest wizard in existence. A man so terrifying to most people that they refused to even say his name. This was the man that had killed Harry's parents, and supposedly died trying to kill Harry. Now he was standing here, and even though he was using Quirrell's body to do it, Harry understood just why everyone was terrified of him.

"Bloody Hell," thought Harry. "I'm so screwed."

“Now, Harry,” continued the face of Voldemort. “I am hoping you can help me with a small problem I seem to be having. I need to get something from this mirror, and Severus and I just don’t seem to be able to do it. Maybe you can be of some assistance?”

Harry hated how Voldemort was talking to him as if he were stupid, but maybe that would play in his favor. If Voldemort thought he was too stupid to figure out what was going on, he might underestimate him, and Harry might be able to use that against the psychopath. Forcing his mind to calm down, Harry smiled thickly at his parents’ killer.

“What’s in it for me?” Harry asked, trying to sound as greedy and dim as he possibly could.

“Well that depends, Harry,” Voldemort almost cooed. “What would you like?”

Ignoring a sudden headache that seemed to be centered on his scar, Harry tried to think of the most childish thing he could. “I want all the candy and toys I could ever want.”

Snape snorted at Harry’s words, but he almost looked proud of his student’s statement. Harry tried not to think about Snape’s reaction as he felt his headache growing worse by the moment. It was like someone was trying to drive a nail into Harry’s mind, and without thinking too much about it, Harry pushed back against the sensation until it finally seemed to vanish. Surprisingly, Voldemort flinched as soon as Harry felt his headache vanish.

“His mind is sealed,” hissed Voldemort to Snape.

“It happens sometimes with the very thick ones,” Snape replied in a stage whisper that Harry could clearly hear. “Master, the boy is as thick as they come, so it is really no surprise.”

Voldemort seemed to consider Snape’s words for a moment before accepting them. “Obviously the old man made a mistake in thinking this boy was anything special.”

Turning his attention back to Harry, Voldemort smiled. If his face was terrifying, then his smile was hideous. Harry wanted to run screaming from the room, but he held his ground hoping that Mr. Knight would arrive soon. Until then, Harry knew he had to stall Voldemort and Snape.

“I promise you, Harry,” Voldemort said in what he obviously thought of as a charming tone of voice, “Get me what I want from this mirror and I will give you everything that you deserve. Do we have a deal?”

Nodding vigorously, Harry kept a dull expression of childish delight on his face as if his life depended on it, which it probably did. Voldemort and Snape stepped aside and Quirrell, or at least his body, gestured for Harry to step forward to stand before the mirror. It was all Harry could do to force himself that close to the man that had killed his parents without attacking him, even if it would cost him his life.

“If he didn’t kill me, then I’m sure Snape would,” Harry thought as he stepped up to the mirror.

“Now all you have to do is tell me what you see in the mirror, Harry,” hissed Voldemort. “Tell the truth because I’ll know if you’re lying.”

“Sure you will,” thought Harry as he looked fully into the mirror. “Just like you know I couldn’t care less about candy and toys.”

Just like at Christmas Harry looked in to the mirror and watched as figures stepped into view in the reflection. The first figure was his older self again, looking calm, but confident. At his reflections side stood the older image of Ginny, smiling out at him as she held hands with Harry’s older self.

“What do you seek?” the older Harry seemed to be asking.

“I need to find the stone before Voldemort does,” was all Harry could think.

“Why?” Ginny’s eyes seemed to ask.

“I can’t let him get his hands on it,” replied Harry in his mind. “This isn’t just my imagination, is it?”

Harry actually heard the older image of himself laugh. “No, it’s not your imagination, Harry. All I can tell you is that someone sought to aid you.”

“What do you see, Harry?” Voldemort asked, his charming tone of voice sounding strained now.

Ginny looked at Harry with a mischievous grin. “Tell him you see yourself surrounded by candy and toys. He probably expects something like that anyway.”

“But first,” the older Harry said, nodding to Ginny.

Harry watched as the reflection of Ginny reached behind her back and pulled out a blood red stone the size of her fist. With a warm smile, she slid the stone into his image’s pants pocket as Harry watched. Then, making Harry blush, she stood up on tiptoe to kiss the older Harry’s cheek. Two things happened as she did, Harry felt a heavy object fall into his front pocket, and he felt lips on his cheek.

“Be ready,” his older self said and vanished, along with Ginny.

“Tell me what you see, Harry!” demanded Voldemort.

“I see myself,” murmured Harry. “I’m surrounded by all the candy I can ever eat, and mountains of toys.”

“FOOL!” screamed Voldemort as Snape pulled Harry from in front of the mirror.

It happened so quickly that he thought he imagined it at first, but Harry prayed he had not. As Snape spun him around, the Potions Professor actually winked at Harry. Then he was facing Voldemort again, and all traces of a smile were gone from the madman’s face.

“Foolish boy,” snarled Voldemort. “I had hoped you had at least enough brains between your ears to be of some use to me. Instead, I find you are little better than a lump of rotted wood.”

Again Harry felt as if someone was trying to force themselves into his mind. Just as before, Harry pushed back against what he now realized was Voldemort trying to see his thoughts. Soon Voldemort was straining to see what was in Harry’s mind, but Harry just pushed him out. With a look of rage on his face, Voldemort finally spun around so that Quirrell could backhand Harry across the face.

“He’s useless,” spat Voldemort as Harry fell to the ground. “To think I was ever worried about him being a threat to me. If I had realized he would grow into this pitiful excuse of a wizard, I would never have attacked him, and never ended up in this wretched existence.”

Quirrell on the other hand looked shocked as he stared at the back of his hand. Large blisters were already forming on his hand where he had touched Harry’s skin and his face had gone deathly pale. From where he lay on the ground, Harry could see that Snape had also seen Quirrell’s hand. Only Snape looked happy to see Quirrell’s discomfort.

“Master!” shrieked Quirrell. “My hand, where I touched the boy, it burns!”

“It looks as if Potter has bubotuber pus on his face,” lied the Potions Master. “He must have gotten some on his face when he passed through my challenge. We did not realize it since Potter is immune to the pus.”

Harry almost objected to the outright lie, but stopped himself when Snape glared down at him. Now, Harry was sure that Professor Snape had not betrayed him, or at least as sure as he could be in the situation. At least now he felt there was a chance of getting out of this alive.

“Tie him up and we’ll kill him later,” ordered Voldemort. “Right now I want that blasted stone before Dumbledore returns.”

“Yes, my Lord,” replied Professor Snape.

With a flick and swish of the Potions Master’s wand, Harry found himself loosely tied up with rope. A moment later and he was lying on the ground with Quirrell watching him closely as Voldemort and Snape began examining the mirror again.

“Don’t even think of moving, Potter,” snarled Quirrell. “I might just decide not to wait to kill you.”

“Like you scare me,” thought Harry, already working his hands towards his wand. “It’s the psycho on the back of your head I’m worried about”

Professor Snape and Voldemort seemed to forget Harry was there as they focused on the mirror once again. Harry tried to hear what they were saying, but the two men were whispering to each other. All Harry could do was try to reach his wand without Quirrell noticing, and the possessed man never even seemed to blink.

“Where is Mr. Knight?” Harry wondered silently. “I’d even be happy to see Dumbledore.”

Suddenly, Professor Snape stepped between Quirrell and Harry so that Voldemort and Quirrell could step fully in front of the mirror. With his hands hidden from view, Snape started motioning for Harry to move.

Harry knew it was his chance to escape and he wasn’t going to waste it. Sliding his hands free, Harry pushed the loose ropes down and off, freeing himself. Then he crawled towards the doorway, trying not to make a sound.

“POTTER!” roared Voldemort.

“Oh fuck,” gasped Harry, slamming the door behind him as he ran across the room.

It was now a race to get to the trapdoor. Harry could only hope that Hermione and Ron had already been rescued, because he did not want to lead Voldemort and Snape to them. He was also hoping that maybe help would be the next door away, but he was not going to hold his breath. He was just entering the room with the troll when he heard the door behind him explode. Harry screamed out in pain when something hit him in the leg, causing him to stumble and slide into the room on his face. Trying to scramble to his feet, Harry screamed again.

When he looked down there was a long shard of wood running straight through his left thigh. He almost passed out looking at it, but Harry forced himself to stay conscious. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Harry dragged himself over to the body of the troll that was still lying in the middle of the room. He just managed to crawl behind the monster when the door behind him exploded.

“I’m in trouble here,” he thought as he listened to two sets of feet running towards him. “I really need some help.”

**BOOM!**

Looking up at the other door, which was now a collection of splinters, Harry saw a familiar figure run in to the room. “Mr. Knight!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Harry,” called back Harry’s benefactor. “I was held up by a meddling old man.”

Looking closer at his friend, Harry saw he was holding a long sword and a shield. It was lucky he was, as a moment later Harry watched as a sickly green beam of light hit it dead center. Mr. Knight ignored the spell and ran directly for Voldemort and Professor Snape. As fast as he was though, with both Voldemort and Snape throwing spells at him, Mr. Knight was forced to keep his distance. It was a stalemate for the moment.

“Who dares stand in my way?” demanded Voldemort.

“Just a humble man, Tom,” replied Mr. Knight, deflecting two more spells.

“Never call me that!” screamed Voldemort. “Avada Kedavra!”

Once again the sickly green spell was deflected off Mr. Knight's shield. Harry watched the three men fighting from behind the body of the troll. Voldemort, or maybe it was actually Quirrell, would continuously cast spells while Professor Snape seemed to be hanging back a bit as he cast. It was almost as if the Potions Master was waiting for something.

Mr. Knight kept deflecting spells, occasionally he would use his sword to reflect them back at his opponents. Harry actually found himself giggling at the sudden image in his head of Mr. Knight playing tennis with the deadly spells. Slowly Mr. Knight was getting closer to Voldemort, but Harry was finding it hard to pay attention to the fight. Harry felt cold and clammy, he felt incredibly tired and his eyes seemed determined to close no matter how much he wanted them to stay open.

“Harry!” someone yelled, but Harry was too far gone to know who.

The world went blank, Harry felt cold tile on his face and then he registered a bright flash of green light. After that he felt like he was floating in a sea of black water. The last thing he remembered was a horrible scream and sound of something rushing past him. Then it was like the ground had swallowed Harry up, because he knew nothing after that.

“Mr. Potter?”

“Harry?”

Harry forced his eyes open, but closed them quickly when the light was too painful. It took him a moment to work up the courage to open them again, only to see two blurry figures standing over him in a brightly lit room. His mind absorbed the sight and Harry reached for his wand, thinking he must still be in the midst of battle.



“Relax, Harry,” said a man’s familiar voice. “You’re safe now.”

“Welcome back, Mr. Potter,” added a woman’s gentle voice.

“Glasses?” he croaked, his throat was painfully dry.

One of the figures placed Harry’s glasses in his hand, and Harry quickly slid the glasses on. He could not help but smile as the world around him finally came into focus. The bright blurry room resolved into the overly familiar infirmary, and Harry was safely tucked in a bed. Madame Pomfrey was smiling at Harry from the foot of the bed, and Mr. Knight was standing next to him.

“After all the times I’ve been here,” rasped Harry, “this is the first time I’ve been the patient.”

“I was starting to wonder if you were going to sleep the day away,” chuckled Mr. Knight.

“How long was I asleep?” croaked Harry.

Madame Pomfrey handed him a glass of water which Harry gratefully accepted. The cold water was a welcome sensation for Harry as it slid down his throat. Mr. Knight smiled at him as he drank. With a gesture from him, Madame Pomfrey left the two of them to speak.

“To answer your question,” Mr. Knight said with a smile, “you’ve been here for about eight hours. You passed out from loss of blood and I brought you here.”

“But what happened to Voldemort?”

“He’s gone for now,” answered Mr. Knight. “He tried to kill you when you passed out, but failed. While he was distracted, I was able to kill his host, Professor Quirrell.”

“You couldn’t kill Voldemort as well?” demanded Harry. “You just let him get away?”

Mr. Knight sighed taking a seat at the foot of Harry’s bed. “I didn’t have a choice, Harry. I had to get you out of there as fast as possible, or you would have died.”

“Stopping Voldemort is more important than saving me.” replied Harry. “I’m just a kid, but he’s a monster.”

Mr. Knight chuckled again before continuing. “I think you underestimate yourself, Harry. Yes, I have the power to trap Voldemort, but only you can kill him.”

“Why me?”

“That scar on your forehead, it’s more than just a scar,” answered the mysterious man. “That scar marks you as Voldemort’s equal, and as such it means that you have it within you to defeat him. I could trap him but then I would change too many things that must happen, things that absolutely must come to pass if there is to be peace in the world again.”

Harry traced his finger over his scar as he thought about what his friend had said. “So, I’m some type of world savior?”

“Unfortunately, Harry, yes you are,” Mr. Knight said softly. “I would change it if I could, but it’s not allowed.”

“What do you mean, not allowed?” asked Harry, looking closer at Mr. Knight. “Who are you really, Mr. Knight?”

“I wondered when you would ask me that,” smiled Mr. Knight. “I can give you three answers to that. The first answer is that I am your friend, no matter what. The second answer is that I am your benefactor and the man that has watched over and protected you since you were a year old.”

“And the third answer?”

Mr. Knight stood up slowly and winked down at Harry. Suddenly he changed from the man Harry recognized as his friend and mentor, into someone he could almost recognize from ancient legends. Before him stood a man in ancient armor, a sword and shield in his hands, and a simple golden crown on his head. He still looked like Mr. Knight, but Harry knew he was something far more.

“Allow me to officially introduce myself, Harry,” smiled Harry friend. “I am Arthur Pendragon, King of the Britains, and last apprentice of Merlin. You can just call me Mr. Knight or Arthur .” Harry’s jaw was resting firmly against his chest as he watched the former King of Britain change back into his friend. He tried to talk, he just could not seem to find the words. It was just too strange to think that Mr. Knight, his long time confident and friend, was the semi-mythical figure that so many kids had dreamed of being when they grew up. It was just too strange.

“King Arthur,” repeated over and over again in his mind.

“Pull it together, Harry,” chuckled Mr. Knight as he sat back down. “I’m the same man you’ve know for so many years. I’ve just got a few more titles.”

“Okay,” stammered Harry. “I’ve got to save the world AND the most famous king of all time is one of my best mates. I’m still asleep, aren’t I?”

In answer to his question, Mr. Knight reached up and tapped Harry’s forehead. “No dream, Harry. You’re really awake, and I’m really here”

Harry nodded, his mind racing as he tried to understand what was happening. “But why me?”

“Think of it this way, Harry,” smiled Mr. Knight. “I’m here because I like you, and because I want to see you win. I have other reasons, but I think we should wait to talk about those until we have a bit more privacy.”

Harry could understand Mr. Knight wanting to play it safe, if not why. He could accept that answers were coming, but there were some questions he needed answers to right away, the least of which being why King Arthur was here helping him.

“How are my friends?”

“They’re fine, Harry,” smiled Mr. Knight. “Neville is asleep a few beds from here. Poppy says he can leave in the morning. Ron and Hermione are already back in the common room.”

“What about the stone?”

Mr. Knight pulled the blood red stone from his pocket and showed it to Harry. “I think it best if I hold on to this for now. I’ve talked with Nicholas and his lovely wife about it and they have agreed to come and stay with me for a while. Nicholas is a truly gifted man. I think he’ll be of great use to us in the future. I think it would be a mistake to let him slip away when we have such need of him, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” For some reason that made Harry feel better. “What about Professor Snape?”

Mr. Knight sighed, looking down at his hands. “Severus did everything he could to protect you, Harry. When he discovered Voldemort down in that room, he acted the part of a devoted servant even though he hated the man more than you can ever understand. In the end he did what he felt had to be done to make sure that you could go on and defeat Voldemort.”

“What does that mean?” asked Harry.

“We all make mistakes in our lives,” answered Mr. Knight said, looking up at Harry. “I know I made my share, and so did Severus. At one time, Severus followed a dark path, and then everything changed for him one day. After that he changed, and swore to do everything he could to stop Voldemort.”

“Okay,” Harry said finally. “I get it, he made a mistake. He was one of Voldemort’s followers, but what I want to know is if he’s okay now?”

“When you passed out,” answered Harry’s friend, “Voldemort cast the killing curse at you. I guess he was trying to distract me so he could get away, or kill me. What he didn’t expect was for Professor Snape to jump in front of the spell.”

Harry could not believe what he was hearing. It just could not be true. Professor Snape could not be dead. There was no way he would throw his life away just to save him, to save Harry. Once again the world started to turn black around Harry and he could not fight it this time.

It was several days later that Harry finally managed to accept the loss of the man that had died to save him. The entire school was gathered in the Great Hall for the end of term feast. No one seemed especially excited about the final meal together, especially the Slytherin students. Things just did not seem real after the events leading up to Professor Snape’s death.

After the deaths of the two professors, rumors had filled the hallways almost as thickly as the ghosts that suddenly seemed to be everywhere. Dumbledore had announced that Professor Snape had died defending the school, but that only seemed to fan the flames since he had made no mention of Quirrell’s death. Many students rightly assumed that Quirrell was responsible, but they also seemed to know that Harry had been involved somehow. Dumbledore’s adamant silence concerning the rumors only convinced people that the rumors were correct. The fact that Harry had been rushed the hospital ward seemed to be all the proof that many of them needed.

“Professor Dumbledore might as well have told them everything that happened, Harry,” Hermione protested as they waited for the awarding of the House Cup.

Harry glanced over at the House point totals noting that Gryffindor was firmly in the lead. "It doesn't matter, Hermione. Let the old man tell them anything he wants, it's no concern of mine."

Harry's friends watched him, his eyes cold and distant as he spoke. He had been like that ever since he had been released from the hospital ward. Ron had argued that it was focus and dedication for the upcoming final Quidditch match, but when the game was cancelled, even Ron had to admit something was wrong with Harry.

At the memorial service for Professor Snape, Harry had surprised everyone by crying for the Potions Master. Hermione and Neville had agreed it was a good sign that he was showing some emotion, but once the service was over Harry had turned cold again. No matter what they tried, Harry refused to let his friends in, and it worried them.

Now, as they sat listening to Dumbledore awarding the house cup, Hermione was worried that Harry could not deal with the loss of Professor Snape. "He's breaking inside, and he won't let us help him."

"He'll let us in when he's ready," was all Neville could answer with as he also watched his friend.

Ron had told her just that morning that Harry had not been writing to Ginny since his return from the hospital. Neville confirmed that Ginny had been sending letters every day, but that Harry had not even bothered to open them. Hermione had never thought Harry would ignore Ginny's letters. That, more than anything else, worried her.

"What happened to you, Harry?" Hermione wondered often.

Even after the awarding of the house cup, Harry had seemed uninterested in talking with his friends. They continued to try talking to him, but he would just ignore them. Eventually, without even saying goodnight, Harry made his way up to his room. When Ron and Neville followed him a few minutes later, they found the drapes around his bed closed. Ron tried to talk to Harry for a little while, but Harry left the drapes closed and refused to speak.

Sleep that night did not come easily to any of the four friends. Only Harry did not seem to mind as his dreams were so filled with pain that lack of sleep seemed better by comparison. An hour before dawn, Harry finally gave up trying to sleep and climbed out of his bed. Dressing silently, Harry made his way out of his room and down to the common room.

As far as he was concerned, the day could not be over too soon, but he felt that way about every day lately. With the knowledge that Professor Snape had died to save his life, combined with Mr. Knight's revelations about his destiny, Harry felt defeated. He could not see how he could be expected to save the world from Voldemort, let alone even survive such a confrontation. Harry felt that he was doomed, and anyone around him would be as well.

Harry had not been idle since being released from the hospital wing. He had used the time to plan out a detailed course of action that would save his friends from his fate. The first step was easy enough. He just had to drive his friends away by ignoring them. So far, that had not worked as well as planned, since his friends had refused to abandon him, no matter how much he ignored them. Even Dumbledore refused to leave him alone, summoning Harry several times to his office. Harry would just ignore the Headmaster as the old man tried to talk to him, eventually being allowed to leave after varying lengths of time where Harry refused to speak.

Grace was another one that refused to be ignored. She had caught Harry alone by the lake several times. The centaur would never say anything, but she also would not leave him alone. During his last visit with Dumbledore, the old Headmaster had informed Harry that special arrangements had been made for Grace to travel with Harry to his home. That would complicate his plans once he arrived.

Still adamantly ignoring everyone around him, Harry found himself sitting on the Hogwarts Express several hours later. Professor McGonagall had performed a very complex series of transfigurations on Grace giving the centaur a human appearance. She now sat with Harry and his friends in their compartment, complaining about the need to wear clothing. She had been required to wear a Hogwarts

robe so she would not draw attention to herself. Grace had, of course, argued that she did not need to wear anything under the robe, but Hermione had finally managed to force Grace in to a loose summer dress so as not to embarrass them when they reached King's Cross.

"You can't wear the robe off the train," Hermione kept telling the centaur. "The dress isn't that bad and once we reach Harry's, you can take it off and Sirius will return you to your natural form."

"We?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Yes," Hermione replied with a smile. "We are all going to your house for the summer, remember?"

"Damn," Harry thought. "I figured no one would want to come if I ignored them. Now I'll never be able to get away."

Running away had been the second part of Harry's plan. He had no idea where he was going to go, maybe to London, but it had occurred to him that if he could just disappear, then he might be able to save his friends and family the grief of his death at the hands of Voldemort. That was not going to be easy if all of them were there with him. He was just about to tell them he did not want them there at home with him when the train slowed down and finally stopped at King's Cross.

"Come on everyone!" Ron shouted. "We're there!"

Still wondering what to do, Harry silently pulled his trunk off the train. All the Weasley boys, except Percy, would be staying the summer at Harry's. Ginny would be joining them as well. Neville was going home for two weeks, then he would also be coming to stay. Add to that the presence of Hermione, Grace, and Harry's cousin Tonks and he had no idea of how to get away long enough to make a run for it.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER!"

Looking up instantly, Harry saw a red haired blur running towards him. A split second later and two arms were wrapped around him so tightly that he could barely breathe. It was only dumb luck that Fred, or



maybe it was George, was standing behind him to hold him up that prevented Harry from falling over. He looked down at the young girl that he had, without even thinking about it, wrapped his arms tightly around.

“Why didn’t you write back?” Ginny asked, her chocolate brown eyes looking up into his emerald green ones. “I was so worried about you.”

That was all it took, seeing her eyes, and the ice wall around Harry’s heart shattered. Tears began pouring from his eyes, and his legs gave out from under him. Falling to his knees in front of her, Harry buried his face in Ginny’s shirt and sobbed. The surprised girl wrapped her small arms around Harry’s head and held him protectively to her. Harry’s friends, as well as Sirius and Remus, circled around the two children as Harry sobbed.

“I messed up so bad, Gin,” sobbed Harry.

Ginny stroked Harry’s hair, tears filling her own eyes. “Don’t you worry about it, Harry. I’m here now, and I’ll make it all better. I promise.”

Author's notes at end of chapter.

## Chapter 18: Epilogue

As Harry, along with his friends and family, made their way towards his home, three other men were all traveling to different locations. Each of them had played a part in the events of the past year, and each had done it for different reasons. Now as things were winding down from the chaos of the past few weeks, they all had time to think about what they would do next, and how Harry Potter would play a part in those plans.

Albus Dumbledore was currently on his way to a meeting with the Minister of Magic. He had been summoned to try and explain what had lead to the deaths of two of his professors. That would be no easy task considering he only had a vague idea of what had occurred in the third floor corridor. After all his careful planning, Harry and his friends had managed to not only find the stone and defeat Voldemort, but Harry's accursed guardian had also managed to prevent him from rushing in at the last moment to save Harry.

"That would have made Harry rely on me more," Albus thought as he arrived at the Ministry. "Instead I find myself trapped in my own office until after it's all over."

Dumbledore was still furious that he had been trapped in his own office for so long. Not even Fawkes had been able to leave the room, and it was supposed to be impossible to stop a phoenix. When it was all said and done, Quirrell was dead, although that had been expected, but so was Severus. His one and only spy inside Voldemort's inner circle was gone, and Dumbledore did not hold any hope of finding another one.

"I must find a way to make Harry rely on my more," fumed the old man. "Everything depends on it."

As Albus was reaching the door to the Minister's office, several hundred miles away, a sickly looking black cat was limping across an empty lot in Ipswich. If anyone looked at the cat they would think it

was ill, and they would not be far off, but what ailed this poor creature was the spirit of a man that refused to die. Voldemort had found the poor animal in Hogsmeade, and had forced it to carry him as quickly as possible from the sight of his most recent defeat.

It had taken the poor animal several days to get this far, every step bringing it one step closer to death, and Voldemort had little hope that creature would make it much further. Not that it mattered to the Dark Lord because as soon as they reached Felixstowe, he would transfer to a rat on one of the ships docked there and make his way off this damned island and back to the relative safety of France, and eventually the dark forests of Albania. There he would hide once more until he was able to formulate a plan that would allow him to return to power. He would have no problem finding bodies to inhabit as he formulated his strategy.

“Then I will have my revenge on Harry Potter, and the man that prevented me from getting my hands on the stone,” thought Voldemort as he pushed his dying host to start moving again. “I just need to find a rat, and I will be on my way to power again.”

Even further away, literally a world away, another man waited for his most recent journey to reach its conclusion. As the long white boat he was riding in finally came to rest against the white stone pier, the captain jumped out gracefully to tie the boat off. The captain, a young woman of exceptional beauty, went about her duties quickly and efficiently as her passengers gathered their things and prepared to disembark. An older man and his wife were talking together in whispers as the captain watched with a secretive smile on her face. She thought they looked as if they were truly in love with one another, and that could not be a bad thing.

As the man and his wife of many years stepped off the boat, the remaining two passengers stayed behind. One of them seemed to be sleeping, the sunlight making him look peaceful and relaxed. The other man, neither young nor old, sat near the sleeping man and waited for his companion to wake up. After several minutes, the sleeping man finally opened his eyes and stretched. He looked around, seeming rather surprised by his current location.

“Finally decided to rejoin the living?” chuckled the other man. “I was starting to think you would sleep forever.”

“I was asleep?” asked the confused man. “For how long?”

“Oh, just long enough for us to get here,” replied the first man. “Now that you’re awake, we can head up to the castle. We have much to talk about, you and I.”

The formerly sleeping man looked up at the castle in the distance. The white stone structure looked more like something out of a child’s fairytale than anything he had ever seen before. The white towers were impossibly delicate, shining in the sunlight. Not designed for war, it was a work of magnificent art.

“Where is this place?”

“Oh, just a little place I like to call home,” answered Mr. Knight, standing and stretching after his long journey. “It has many names, but I like to call it Avalon.”

The other man, his eyes looking rather wild, swallowed hard at these words. “Am I dead then?”

Mr. Knight chuckled as he stepped out of the boat. “Not exactly, but I’ll explain all of that in time. For now we have to get you settled, and then we have to talk with Nicholas.”

“But why am I here?”

“We have a great deal of work to do, if we are to help Harry defeat Voldemort,” replied Mr. Knight with a smile. “Work that I think you are perfectly suited to help me with, Severus.”

The End.

AN: Oh dear... that was a very short final chapter. It’s almost as if I’m just teasing you. Well, maybe I am. Whatever the case may be, I want you all to know how much I appreciate you reading this story.

I'll be taking a little time off to work on an original project, and on a story dealing with another beloved series. After that is done, I'll be returning to work on the next story in this series. The next title will be, Harry Potter and Slytherin's Secret. I'm not going to tell you a lot about it right now since as I want it all to be a surprise.

Once again, I want to thank my lovely and talented betas, C & M, for all their hard work. Without them, I doubt this story would be anywhere near as good as it is.

So, for now, I will bid you a fond farewell.

Chris